# SCARY HALLOWEEN STORIES

BILLY WELLS

# Scary Halloween Stories

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my brothers, Edward & Michael Pietrzyk.

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# Something in the Attic

It was Halloween, Norma's favorite day of the whole year. She couldn't wait for the night to come when there would be magic in the air. Tonight would even be more special since her parents said there would be a full moon. She loved to see all the scary costumes, and she couldn't wait to snack on all the goodies after the tide of trick or treaters stopped coming.

Her parents had gone shopping, and she had nothing else to do but go to the attic and find the costume she would wear tonight.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she saw a group of boxes near the window with the words "HALLOWEEN" written in black Magic Marker. As she moved closer to them, the ceiling became lower, and she had to crouch to avoid

hitting her head on the rafters. Several dead wasps littered the top of the insulation on the floor.

As she started to pull down the carton of Halloween paraphernalia, she noticed the familiar, but weird black box covered in a strange fabric labeled “GRANDMA HECATE” beside it. Just like last year, the strange box intrigued her, and since it was only early afternoon, she decided to rummage through it before selecting her Halloween costume.

Grandma Hecate had passed away five years before when Norma was only eight years old. For most of her life, Grandma had lived in a small cottage at the edge of the swamps in Louisiana. When she became too senile to care for herself, she had moved in with them in New Orleans. Norma remembered all the wonderful presents Grandma had given her when she was a little girl. She also recalled how Grandma always smelled like cinnamon when she crawled up on her lap to listen to bedtime stories.

Inside the carton, she found a mishmash of souvenirs, old books, boxes of ancient photographs, and several Cabbage Patch dolls. And like last year, she picked up the old diary with yellow, brittle pages and opened it.

Norma knew the diary had belonged to her great, great, great, great Grandma Priscilla, who her mother said the Puritans burned at the stake during the Salem witch trials. Grandma Hecate had told her scary stories about what happened to their beloved ancestor over three hundred years ago. She said it was a terrible time in American history and very traumatic for our family.

This strange black book always fascinated Norma. She had never seen anything like it. Turning the yellow pages that had come loose from their binding, she marveled at the Satanic passages her Grandma said were incantations to various goblins and demons. Much of the writing written in dark red ink looked like blood. She remembered reading some of the passages when she came to the attic last year for her Halloween costume.

Putting Priscilla’s book aside, Norma noticed a small

ragged volume tucked vertically between the other books. Pulling it free in a cloud of dust, she began to browse through it. The condition of this coverless book was much worse than the others. The pages were even more dog-eared and had turned almost orange in color. She immediately assumed it was even older than the black book that dated back to the late seventeenth century. On the top of the first page, someone had written, “To Hecate, for your eyes only. Simon.”

Norma didn't remember seeing this book before and began reading the first page with great interest. After reading a few more pages, a strange feeling came over her. When she tried to get up, she lapsed into unconsciousness and slumped to the floor.

* * *

When Norma awakened several hours later, she found herself dazed and disoriented with her head resting against the box of Grandma's Hecate belongings. Night had fallen and turning to look outside, she saw the full moon framed in the window and gasped. She’d never experienced such an odd feeling. She wondered if she’d had an allergic reaction to something in the attic. Had a wasp stung her?

Immediately, she placed the old book on the floor, and struggling to her feet in a stupor, she scurried down the stairs in a panic.

“This was unbelievable,” she thought. She had somehow fallen asleep and had not done one thing her parents had asked her to do to prepare for Halloween, the most important night of the year.

Racing to the cupboard, she grabbed several bags of candy. The kitchen clock read 8:05. She grimaced at the thought she may have missed the entire parade of trick-or-treaters. Most parents would not allow their children to beg for candy much later than eight o’clock in this neighborhood.

Norma trudged out on the front porch dejected and disappointed. She doubted anyone would come this late, but then, to her surprise, a diminutive zombie dressed like something from the Walking Dead TV show shambled up to

the picket fence. A shorter monster wearing a Freddie Krueger costume, complete with plastic knives on his fingers and a fedora hat, stood beside him ready to spring into the yard.

As the zombie started to pull the catch to open the gate, both monsters spotted Norma sitting in the shadows and froze in their tracks. The zombie withdrew his hand like he'd touched a hot potato, and the two of them ran screaming down the street.

Norma couldn't understand what had happened. Then, looking down at what she was wearing, she realized she had forgotten to put on her Alice in Wonderland costume. It was the best one she had to lure unsuspecting humans right into her mole-covered hands. She'd gone to the attic to get it but forgot to put it on. She had never blundered so badly. The two children who had come to the gate had seen her real face, which, understandably, had scared them out of their wits.

Suddenly, over the rooftops, Norma saw two shadows fly across the moon. She felt a sudden chill in the air and detected the faint smell of brimstone. Then, she heard the familiar voice of her father as her parents swooped down in the front yard and dismounted their broomsticks.

Her mind seemed cloudy as she gathered her thoughts to speak, but before she could utter a word, her mother asked excitedly," How many trick-or-treaters did you lure into the torture chamber for next year's meal program?"

Norma continued to sit there looking into space and said nothing.

"Well, how many?" her father barked.

"None," Norma said blankly.

"None?'" her father shrieked, slamming his chainsaw and hatchet down on the front porch, "I told you not to drink so much of that brew for lunch. You know how much it mellows you. You've squandered the most important night of the year."

His face reddened as he stood fuming and waited for an explanation for Norma's lack of follow-through. When she

still didn't respond, he continued to rant, "I can't get over the way you teenagers let so many golden opportunities slip by to make something of yourselves. This was your chance to put your name on the leader board, and what did you do? Zero kills on Halloween. Pathetic. Worse than pathetic."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I found two dog-eared books in the attic, which sidetracked me. I think one belonged to Great, Great, Great, Great Grandma Priscilla from 1683, and the other belonged to Grandma Hecate, at least someone had written her name on the inside cover. When I started reading, a strange feeling came over me, and I drifted off to sleep. When I awoke, it was dark, I felt woozy, and my head was spinning."

"I told you the brew was potent. It contains eye of newt," her mother piped in as a black cat crossed their paths.

"I don't know, Mother." Norma said perplexed, "I've been drinking your brew every Halloween, but it never made me feel like this."

"Well, don't worry, darling," the old hag croaked, "We bagged enough of the annoying little creeps on the playground right before school closed for the whole family. We hid them in an abandoned graveyard. They'll keep nicely until morning, and we can have one for breakfast. You can help us load the rest of their carcasses into the dump truck for cold storage. You'll feel better after a good nightmare."

"Did you chop off any of their fingers and toes?" Norma asked, licking her slimy lips, "You know I have a sweet tooth."

"Yes, we knew you'd want something to snack on this evening," her mother said, dragging a black sack from behind her back and putting it down on the front porch.

Norma picked out a thumb dog with sauerkraut and mustard her mother had wrapped in a bloody rag and popped it between her fangs, wrapper, and all. "Ugh!" she gasped, spitting out a sliver of bone and taking a drink. This was one of her favorite snacks, but tonight, she could barely get it down even with a goblet of blood chaser.

Her father selected a slice of cheek from the bloody stew of body parts in the bag and went inside the house to take a pee and find some salsa for dipping.“

Popping a chocolate eyeball between her black teeth, her mother knew something was very wrong with her daughter. Norma had barely touched the juicy tongue with some of the roots still attached that most witches would crawl into bed with the devil for, “You're not yourself tonight, Norma. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“I don’t think it was the brew, Mother. Something came over me when I read Grandma’s old book. Somehow for the first time in my life, I didn't have my usual craving to butcher the two little trick-or-treaters that came to the gate.”

“For Satan’s sake,” her mother hissed, “Don’t let your father hear you say that. If he knew puny mortals came to our yard, and you let them live, he’d go ballistic. Why we’d be the laughing-stock of the coven and never live it down.”

“I felt so strange after reading that chapter from the book,” Norma swooned as more shadows flew across the moon.

“What was this strange book you found in Granny’s old box?”

Norma looked look up at her mother with a strange light in her eyes and whispered, not wanting her father to hear, “the cover was missing, but the inside page read, “Holy Bible”.

# The Party

It was Halloween, and Oscar's boss had asked him to work late. *Of all the nights for the asshole to grab him on the way out the door*. Oscar was pissed beyond belief. He'd spent almost twenty dollars on a new costume to scare the living shit out of the little monsters who came begging for candy at his apartment every year.

It was eight o'clock. Parents didn't usually let their brood stay out any later than this. It was as if they thought vampires and werewolves really walked the streets of suburbia after that. *What a fucking joke*. Nothing exciting had happened in this neighborhood sent someone hung old Mrs.

Putnam's cat from a tree and shit on her front doorstep. The battle-ax deserved what she got. She was the meanest, ugliest bitch he'd ever known. He used to deliver newspapers to her. She complained to his boss about them landing in the shrubs countless times. Hey, two out of three ain't bad. At least Meatloaf thought so.

As he drove toward his fleabag apartment, he wondered what he could do at 8:30 on Halloween night. The streets were almost empty. He thought about the possibility of Joe Pompano having a party. He knew Joe loved Halloween. He had more decorations in his front yard every year than anyone. Oscar turned the corner on Melrose. He hadn't been invited, if there were a party, but Joe always said, *the more, the merrier*.

When Oscar pulled up in front of Joe's place, he couldn't believe his eyes. The house was dark. There were no tombstones, scary leaf bags, or any other Halloween stuff decorating the front yard. *What was the world coming to?* Then Oscar remembered how he had heard Joe Pompano got hitched some time during the year. The worthless bitch he married probably put the kibosh on Joe's fabulous parties. *Shit!*

Well, Oscar could go to the movies, but he couldn't think of any cool scary movies playing at the Bijou, only chick flicks. He would rather watch paint dry than watch that crap. He wanted to see a horror movie. It was Halloween, for Christ's sake.

As he passed Shadow Lane, he thought he heard music. He lowered the car window, and, sure enough, he heard "Werewolves of London" playing somewhere in the distance to the left.

Mother of God, who would be playing "Werewolves of London" so loud in this neighborhood? He couldn't get his mind around the concept, but he turned around his Kia and headed down Shadow Lane.

The dark, dismal street had only a few houses at the very beginning of it. After that, an abandoned cemetery and the deserted house were the only things here at the dead-

end street. Oscar snickered. *It's a dead-end street all right*. He saw headstones in all states of disrepair, decay, and ruin along the right side of the street. Then he saw a weather-beaten sign hanging lopsided at the entrance that read Morningside Cemetery.

As Oscar drove slowly forward, he tried to avoid the broken beer bottles littering the street. Then he slammed on his brakes when he saw black limousines parked on both sides in front of the long-vacated, dilapidated Lugosi mansion.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Someone was having a Halloween party in the old place. He saw two vans with Harry's Liquors and Spirits signs on the side of them. Several partygoers outfitted in costumes and masks were headed for the front door. He could see the flame of a cigarette someone had flicked on the asphalt.

Alice Cooper's voice was howling songs from his album *Welcome to My Nightmare* inside the house. No one would be calling the police to shut down this party. The only neighbors at this end of the street had been dead for decades.

He wanted to join in all the fun, but he didn't have an invitation. Yet he did have the costume he had bought at Kmart. He had a black cloak to cover his clothes and a *Scream* mask to cover his face in the trunk. *Maybe he could slip in without an invitation*.

He got out of his car, took his costume from the trunk, and quickly put it on behind the Harry's Liquors' van. He didn't think anyone had noticed him as he approached the front door. Some dude who looked like a seven-foot version of Lurch from *The Addams Family* TV show stood vigil. The limousines along the street were a testament the guests at this party were wealthy.

Oscar approached the front porch waiting for the right time to crash the party. He paused behind the rickety post holding up the sagging porch overhang and bent down to tie his shoe. Lurch must have thought Oscar was mentally challenged he stayed down so long, and there weren't any

laces on his penny loafers.

He was about to faint from the blood rushing to his head when he checked the door and discovered Lurch was no longer there.

Oscar quickly darted inside and threaded his way through the crowd of masqueraders to a table with several empty chairs. Looking around at the four people sitting at the other end of the table for ten, Oscar saw two of them had come as zombies, one wore a Michael Myers mask, and the last looked like the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

*Christ, these people must have gone to a professional costume shop*. He'd never seen costumes as good as these at Joe Pompano's parties.

In the dark interior, only lighted by candles situated sparingly around the room, the house looked good for being vacant for decades. The host must have hired a cleaning service and a contractor to spruce up the place for the party. They had done a great job. He wondered why anyone would do anything so stupid. *Was there a new owner?*

In the glow from the guttering candles, he saw spider webs. He couldn't tell if they were fake or real. There were several waiters serving hors d'oeuvres and goblets of something red. *Blood?* He chuckled under his breath, probably to add to the ambience. The host had thought of everything.

When he had first entered the foyer, he'd seen the main room had about fifty guests. This alcove had about twenty-five. Everyone wore hideously gruesome costumes.

A waiter stopped at his table with a tray of goblets. "What will you be having to drink, sir?" he asked stiffly.

"What do you have there on the tray?"

"The special for the evening, my good man, is Bloody Mary."

"I think I'll try one."

The waiter, whose face was as pale as a corpse, had deep caverns in his cheeks that made him look like he was a hundred years old. He placed the goblet of the red stuff on a napkin in front of Oscar.

"Would you care for something to snack on, sir?"

"I believe I will," Oscar replied with an air of formality.

The waiter placed a plate of hors d'oeuvres in front of Oscar and went to serve the four guests at the end of the table.

Oscar took a sip of his drink and was taken aback by the bland taste of it and the absurdity of it not being served with ice. He thought this was carrying the blood thing too far. He would ask for a Rolling Rock when the waiter came again. He couldn't see the items on the plate clearly since the room was so dark, but he picked up a small item and bravely popped it into his mouth. He was starving.

Oscar let it lay on his tongue for a few seconds to test the waters. He'd never tasted anything like this. It reminded him of an oyster. It had a slimy texture, but, as far as taste, it wasn't so bad. He picked up a second item and bit into it. It also was not something he could identify. When he closed his teeth and bit down, liquid from inside exploded in his mouth. It also didn't taste bad. The outer covering was a bit chewy, but finally he was able to swallow it.

This food must be for rich people. Maybe it was frog legs, caviar, snails—stuff he'd never tasted and never wanted to taste. Give him a burger and some fries any day. Why didn't they at least have some normal snacks—chips, meatballs, and chicken fingers—like Joe Pampano?

He took another sip of his drink. *Ugh, not nearly as good as the punch Joe served at his parties*. This Bloody Mary needed salt and a lot more Tabasco and horseradish. It was far too bland.

Oscar knew this old house wouldn't have electricity to accommodate a refrigerator, but he didn't know why the caterers wouldn't have brought ice. He wondered if the beer would be cold.

Oscar was thirsty from the mystery food, but he decided to wait for the waiter to return to ask for something else to eat and drink. He didn't want to move around too much for fear someone might realize he had crashed the party. His mask from Kmart only cost $9.99, and he'd only

paid nine dollars for the black cloth for his cloak. Certainly well below what the other guests had paid for their elaborate costumes.

Suddenly a long shadow fell on his table, and two masqueraders took the empty seats next to him.

"Good evening," the man, dressed as a vampire, said in a refined European accent.

The woman, dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein, said, "Isn't this a wonderful party?"

Oscar answered with his most sophisticated voice, "It certainly is. I'm having a grand time."

"I particularly like the hors d'oeuvres, don't you?" she continued.

"Very tasty," Oscar said, trying not to puke.

"Did you come from far?"

"No," Oscar said nervously. "I live in the area."

The two looked at him oddly. The man daintily picked something from his plate and popped it into his mouth. Oscar was impressed with the lifelike protruding canines. The man smiled and said, "I haven't had tongue this fresh for decades. It almost melts in your mouth."

"No preservatives, dear," the refined woman said.

Oscar looked at them oddly. "Tongue," he grimaced. Something he'd never eaten in his life and had never planned to eat. He'd seen it at the local deli. "*Oooh*." He cringed with disgust. Rich people had apparently acquired a taste for stuff like tongue and shortbread. *Brains. That was something else he never planned to put between his teeth*.

Trying not to be unfriendly, Oscar asked, "Did you come from far?"

"Actually we flew in from Transylvania," the man said. "We had a little trouble finding this house. We couldn't have done it without the cemetery as a landmark. Everything looks tiny from the sky, particularly at night."

Oscar smiled in agreement at his ridiculous remark. *These people were certainly laying it on thick. Transylvania. They probably lived in one of those big houses on South Mountain Avenue*. Just to see what they'd say, Oscar asked,

"Which airport did you land at, Newark or JFK?"

They looked at him even more oddly than before, rose quickly to their feet, and rushed into the main room. He saw them talking to Lurch through the doorway and pointing in his direction.

Oscar turned away and hoped he hadn't said the wrong thing. He was hungry, but he didn't like the looks of the two things left on his plate. Something gray and oval that looked like a small egg. He thought it might be another chewy thing filled with that icky liquid. And one more slab of tongue.

Taking another sip of his cocktail, he grimaced. *The Bloody Mary really sucked*. He saw another waiter entering his room with something else on a tray. It looked green. *What could it be?* It looked too thick to be apple martinis. Oscar took a chance, got up, inched down the wall, and entered the main room. Immediately he saw something hanging from the ceiling. About ten partygoers were standing around a humongous punch bowl directly below whatever hung there. It was so dark he couldn't see it clearly. He wondered if it was some sort of large piñata. He inched closer to get a better look.

He almost pissed and shit at the same time when he saw the thing hanging from the ceiling was a young girl no more than sixteen years old with her throat cut. The people standing next to the punch bowl were filling their goblets with her blood that had collected in the bowl from the nasty gash in her neck. She had a sign glued to her forehead that read Bloody Mary.

Immediately Oscar wondered who or what the faces of the psychopaths looked like under the masks and started to quake with fear. What had he gotten himself into? He decided to return to his half-full table and not say another word to anyone. He still had half a glass of Bloody Mary in his goblet, and he would hold on to it, pretending to drink it, until he saw a way to sneak out of this madhouse undetected. There were at least two hundred possible bloodsucking psychos inside the house.

Half an hour later, his nerves were raw from the anxiety of what he knew could be his last night on Earth. If he was discovered, he might be the next human piñata hanging from the ceiling with his throat cut. If he ever got out of this death trap, he would start going to church again every Sunday.

A different waiter entered the room with a tray of round objects in a milky sauce. "Care for a sautéed eyeball, sir?"

"I'll pass," Oscar said enthusiastically. "I had too much Bloody Mary."

Oscar couldn't see the waiter's eyes clearly for the mummy cloth wrapped around his head, but the exaggerated pause of suspicion was unmistakable. Oscar wondered why he kept interacting with these bloodsuckers. Every stupid word he said could bring a gang of them down on him and spell his doom.

Trying to recover, he said, "On second thought, I will have another. I may be ravenous before this party is over at … What time will the party be over?"

"About one o'clock, after the contest, when everyone unmasks and socializes for about an hour. Did you attend last year's party at Lon Chaney's mausoleum?"

Oscar said, feigning disappointment, "I had a previous engagement, and I missed it."

"You're in for a treat then," the waiter crowed. "I thought I had a chance to win the grand prize last year after my face melted when I was trapped in a house fire, but I didn't even place. I thought I had a cast-iron stomach, but I humiliated myself when I saw the winner and puked my guts out on the front porch."

Oscar heard Sam the Sham's howl as "Little Red Riding Hood" started playing on exceptionally good-sounding speakers.

"Don't you need another drink to wash down your snacks?" the waiter asked politely.

"What is that green cocktail?"

"Oh, a real delicacy. It's called a green goddess,

something from the Bayou Swamp. A blend of toadstools, grasshoppers, garnished with frozen praying mantis wings. A real crowd-pleaser."

"It sounds perfectly delightful," Oscar lied.

"Would you like me to send Meat Hook with a tray?"

"Not right now," Oscar said. "Maybe later."

The waiter shambled off.

If Oscar was to escape, he needed to come up with a plan before the unmasking ceremony. He couldn't imagine how gruesome these things might be without their masks. *What could be worse than someone with a scorched-black, melted face? Was the waiter joking?* Oscar didn't think so.

Suddenly a deep baritone voice announced, "Tonight's appetizer, iced varicose veins in a cherry sauce, will now be served. Please return to your seats."

Oscar heard a swoon of pleasure fill the room. Waiters started serving a small crystal bowl with the apparent party favorite. A waiter served one for each guest at Oscar's table.

When no one was looking, Oscar dumped his bowl of veins in the dark corner behind him. He also dumped the remaining snacks from his plate there as well.

What to do? Time was passing like a runaway train. Unstoppable. It was ten o'clock. He wondered if these things ever had to go to the bathroom. He didn't need to go, but the bathroom may have a door or window to the outside. He must escape before midnight.

He rose and started looking at alcoves leading away from the main rooms. He was afraid to ask for directions for fear he'd give himself away.

Even if these creatures didn't need a bathroom, the occupants who lived here before must have had one. Finally Oscar saw a doorway in the hall, which he thought must be a bathroom. He darted down the hallway and was swallowed in blackness. He'd forgotten there was no electricity in the house. He felt for the doorknob and opened the door. Inspecting the room cloaked in darkness except for the candlelight in the hall, to his chagrin, he could see no

windows or doors to the outside.

He heard a movement. Something was in here with him. As he moved quickly back to the doorway, he felt a cold hand grip his arm. He cried out from the sudden fright. An eerie voice said, “Sorry to bother you, old chap. Do you have a straight razor on you? I have to hang another teenager from the ceiling and cut their throat, and I've misplaced mine. The guests are getting cranky. The punch bowl is empty.”

“Sorry. I don’t have my straight razor with me.” Oscar pulled away, returned to the main room, and took his seat at the table,

A few minutes later, a rousing applause filled the first floor. Oscar saw two masked men take down the limp body hanging from the ceiling, and, moments later, they replaced it with another frantic, hysterical young girl. He saw the motion of another man cutting her throat. Her screaming stopped abruptly with the severing of her vocal cords. Thirty guests rushed from all directions to the replenished punch bowl and filled a goblet with warm blood.

Suddenly Oscar heard a commotion at the front door. Then Lurch and three enormous goons dragged two uniformed police officers into the main room.

Oscar heard someone say, “Can you believe it? Two policemen wanted to know who was having a party.”

The comment was met with uproarious laughter. Another shouted, “You know what they say about being at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He heard a waiter passing his table say, “The Bloody Jennifers and the policemen should last until the unmasking at midnight.”

After cutting both police officers’ throats, several goons hung them alongside Jennifer on gigantic hooks suspended from the ceiling. About twenty more partygoers rushed to the steel basin and filled a clean goblet with the fresh blood. Oscar felt queasy, realizing he would certainly be faced with the same fate if he were discovered. He looked at his watch. One hour to go to find an escape route. A ponderous gong sounded somewhere in the house.

At 11:15, the guests at Oscar's table stood and started moving toward the main room. Oscar had no choice but to follow. A makeshift stage had been erected on one side of the large room. At 11:30, Sheb Wooley's 1958 hit, "The Purple People Eater," stopped abruptly, and a voice came over the loudspeaker. "Now what we have been waiting for will commence. All those who have entered the masquerade for the most horrific face contest, please form a line on the left."

Oscar saw the line forming, and then a drum roll began the competition.

The deep, eerie voice boomed, "Let us begin with last year's winner, Maynard Creeps." A figure in a black cloak—wearing a George W. Bush mask—stepped briskly across the platform and let the garment slip from his shoulders onto the floor. With a theatrical flair, he removed his mask with his back toward the audience and quickly twirled to face them, shouting "Boo!" Several guests in the front row let out a gasp and slumped from their chairs onto the floor. The sound of violent retching emanated from others at various tables as the sweet smell of vomit began to engulf the room.

Oscar stood transfixed, glaring at the hideous misshapen face in the spotlight, on a head that appeared to have been partially crushed by a sledgehammer on the left side. The left eye socket was sunken in, and no eyeball was visible. The apparent damage to the left side of the face had noticeably ballooned and deformed the right side. The right eye and cheek protruded outward, as if about to explode.

Oscar turned quickly away, and felt his stomach tighten and bile fill his throat. He could not imagine another contestant who could approach the magnitude of the grisly atrocity he'd just witnessed. He had no idea what horrible incident could have caused such a shocking injury or how the victim could have survived it. That is, if he were alive.

A thundering applause shook the room, and afterward a booming voice on the loudspeaker announced, "The grand prize this year will be the coveted mirror ball trophy and a lifetime supply of fresh human blood."

The audience applause was deafening.

"And now," the announcer continued. "Vlad McFreak, a finalist three years ago is back to tickle your scary bone."

Oscar watched something in an expensive leather poncho and colorful Mexican sombrero shamble from the wings to center stage. The thing shed his leather gloves, revealing pale bony fingers. It quickly let the poncho fall to the floor and lifted the wide sombrero from his head. The audience gasped when the skeletal form of rotting flesh and green worm-infested earth stood before them with a hideous grin on its corpselike face. If the thing had eyes within the deep hollow orbs, it wasn't obvious. Black rotten teeth were visible through the open cavities in both cheeks. The stench emanating from the putrid thing was stifling as it exited off stage to uproarious applause, similar to the first contestant.

Afterward three more contestants appalled every member seated in the main room. The announcer boomed, "Now, my good friends, it is time to return to your original seats in order to select the last five contestants for the contest."

As the minutes ticked away, Oscar knew his only hope was to get lost in the hubbub of the unmasking. Maybe he could contort his face to make himself look horrible. Spencer Tracy had used this technique as Mr. Hyde in the movie *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* rather than wearing makeup.

At 11:45 the announcer boomed, "In addition to the five finalists from previous Halloweens, we have placed a buzzer under random chairs in the four rooms. If a buzzer goes off under the chair where you are sitting, you will be drafted as a contestant in The Most Horrible Face Contest. Consequently you will be a contender for the grand prize. The contest is more interesting when new participants compete for the big prize. One of the former finalists may still turn out to be the most horrific this year, but possibly something new might walk or crawl away a winner. Even monsters like to root for the underdog."

No sooner had the announcement been made than Oscar felt and heard the buzzer go off under his chair. Lurch

and another bouncer came to his table and escorted him to the stage. He was overcome with fear as he tried to put one foot in front of the other and trudged reluctantly to his impending doom. If only he had gone to bed rather than foolishly crashing this party.

He watched the four gruesome monstrosities before him unmask and the reaction of the audience, as each thing disrobed and finally removed whatever covered their hideous faces.

Oscar was the last of the five new contestants. Several of the competitors saw his reluctance to walk to center stage and pushed, prodded, and snarled gleefully for him to unveil whatever lie beneath his ridiculous *Scream* mask.

After standing alone on the stage, peering at the eerie masks facing him in the audience, he finally unfastened the string holding his cloak on and let it fall.

"Take off the mask," something squealed from the left.

"Snap it up. I have a babysitter," something shouted. “I need to get back to my lair.”

Oscar’s hand was shaking so hard, it was almost a blur when he grabbed the top of his mask and let it fall to the stage floor. Immediately he did his pitiful Spencer Tracy aka Mr. Hyde facial contortion.

Oscar waited for the ax to fall and the onslaught of bouncers to grab him, thrust him on a spike, and slit his throat. But instead he heard a roomful of gasps, and quite a few masqueraders lifted their masks to retch.

After standing spellbound for another minute, the announcer ordered the other nine contestants to join Oscar at center stage.

A panel of judges deliberated for about three more minutes. Oscar saw them shaking their heads, and incredibly they kept pointing at him.

Finally the announcer was given a slip of paper, and his voice rang out, "Each year we say these are the most horrible contestants we've ever had. This year is no

exception. I'm sure we all thought that last year's champion would be impossible to beat, and he would hold the crown for years to come. But we were wrong. Contestant number ten is by far the ultimate horror in our three-hundred-year history of Halloween parties. Can anything in the future hope to take the coveted mirror ball trophy from his claw? Only time will tell. Well, it's the witching hour. Midnight, boys and ghouls. We can all unmask and show the monsters we've been chewing the fat with all night just how hideous we are."

At the stroke of twelve, a bong sounded. Everyone removed their masks and tossed them into the air like graduation caps. A raucous applause and cheers built to a thundering climax of weird animal shrieks and screams.

Several of the other monsters approached Oscar and offered him their claw, talon, or skeletal hand in congratulations. As he lifted his hand in response, he no longer saw the hand of a human being but something green and ghastly from the ocean. Now he understood why he had not become a human piñata. He had become a monster of epic proportions so gruesome he had won the contest. Apparently entering the Lugosi house on this night was stepping into another world where only monsters exist.

The emcee joined him at center stage and gave him a certificate for a lifetime supply of human blood. He saw the envy in the eyes of the other creatures, who drooled beside him. He grabbed the trophy with his other claw and headed for his car. He'd had enough partying for one night. Apparently the monsters around him had had enough as well, because they were piling into their vehicles parked up and down the street and tooling off into the night. He saw the vampire and his wife, who had been sitting at his table, taking wing back to Transylvania.

When Oscar reached his car, he felt for his keys, and, finding them, unlocked the rear door and pitched his certificate and the coveted mirror ball trophy on the backseat. Then he opened the driver's side door to get in and bumped his head. Due to his massive growth, he could no longer fit in the car. He saw himself in the window glass,

towering over the roof like a small Godzilla. He was at least ten feet tall and five feet wide with eight tentacles protruding from his body, each with a row of ugly suckers. Several carloads of monsters honked their horns and chided him, but none stopped to help. He assumed they were green with envy.

It wasn't long before every car along both sides of the street was gone, and he was alone.

Then he heard the sound of blaring music approaching and quickly lumbered behind a clump of bushes. A carful of juvenile delinquents in an ugly canary-yellow sedan pulled alongside his clunker. They all had reefers hanging from their lips. Tattoos covered every inch of visible skin.

"Look at that car. Some asshole left it here for us," a dark-haired teen in a leather jacket shouted. "Let's not disappoint him."

The driver popped the trunk of Oscar's car, and another removed the jack and shattered Oscar's side window with it.

Unlocking the door, two of the teenagers searched the backseat while two others canvassed the front seat. One yelled, "Nothing here worth stealing."

The tallest one asked, "What about the tires?"

A blond fat boy answered, "Bald."

"Okay, pop the hood. Let's see what the battery looks like," the tall one ordered.

Oscar peeked from around the corner at the teens trashing his car, and he began to feel extremely hungry. The pitiful hors d'oeuvres had been almost inedible, and he'd only eaten a few morsels. Like a giant Anaconda, he slithered silently toward the five teens, who were completely unaware of his presence.

One of them said, "The battery looks ancient. Whoever owned this piece of shit is as broke as we are. I wish I could get my hands on him."

Oscar shouted, "Here I am, asshole." Before the teenager knew what hit him, two of Oscar's tentacles swept

around him and tore off an arm and a leg. The others ran for their car, got in, and started off, but several more of Oscar's tentacles swept underneath the vehicle and turned it over on its top. The four teenagers inside kept screaming as they peered at the green snake monster devouring their buddy like a human puppet.

* * *

It was almost dawn before Oscar had sucked the final slivers of flesh from the last bone of the teenagers. The yard all around the two vehicles was covered in blood and gore, but Oscar had picked all the bones clean.

His belly was ready to explode as he slithered toward the Hudson River. Oscar had never been a swimmer or a sunbather, but the smell of the dark, cold water made him feel like he would be home soon.

# The Ripper

It was Halloween, and it was getting dark. Gomer was excited about seeing the trick-or-treaters. He'd bought four bags of candy for the children, who usually came with their parents just before dark. His house was the last one on the street, and he worried every year the parents may not come all the way to the end.

He was barely making it with his meager retirement checks, and his house looked increasingly shabby as the years went by from lack of maintenance. Also, the two houses on both sides of the street closest to his house were vacant. Without the lights in these adjoining houses, his

location on Shady Lane was eerily dark and foreboding. To make matters worse, the light on the pole across the street had burned out the day before, and no one had come to repair it.

*Oh, well. What could he do but hope for the best?*

After buying the candy, he'd spent his last dime on an antiquated, Ninja Turtle mask with a hole in the cheek. He preferred a scary mask but never got one because he feared it would frighten the children. He would have to go hungry for a few days because of the Halloween purchase, but it would be worth it if he could see the happy children in their gruesome little costumes.

He hoped the terrible Ramos brothers would not interfere with his plans for a wonderful evening. These hoodlums were much too old to beg for candy now, but they always seemed to come around to harass him at the worst times.

Gomer sat on his front porch, bubbling over with anticipation. He saw the parades of parents and children passing down the block. He kept watching them come and go as close as two doors up from his, but sadly, none of them came to his house at the end of the street.

Two hours passed without one trick-or-treater darkening his doorstep. When Gomer looked at his watch and saw it was 8 p.m., he knew his plans for a good time had passed. What was worse, he feared the parents would never bring their children to his house ever again. Shady Lane was just too dark and spooky.

He found ten peanuts in a jar in the cupboard, and since it was all he had to eat, he placed each one in this mouth and sucked all the nourishment from each morsel before he chewed and swallowed it. One of his front teeth was loose, and he feared he would soon be meeting the public with a tooth missing. He certainly had no money for dental work.

When he rose from his dilapidated chair to go inside the house, he noticed a light flickering in the middle of the street and decided to investigate.

On the other side of the deserted house, someone had placed an oil lantern and a platform constructed from plywood with a dead cat dangling from it. A sign hung from a nail that read: Happy Halloween Come To My House, Kiddies. I Have Something For You That Will Be Yummy. Gomer. The Last House At The End Of The Street."

"Those bastards," he growled. Now he understood all too well, why no children had come to his house. The Ramos brothers had struck again and deprived him of the one night of enjoyment he looked forward to all year.

He ripped the sign from the nail, extinguished the light, and took the things back to his house for collection by the garbage man the next morning.

Gomer was going on eighty-five years old and did not want to have a confrontation with these hoodlums. Rumor had it they were in a notorious gang that could only spell more trouble if he sought revenge. When they were younger, they had dented his mailbox with a baseball bat, toilet papered his trees and bushes, and hurled rotten eggs at the side of his house several different times, but he had never caught them doing it even once. He had no idea why they enjoyed picking on him. He'd never done anything to them to cause the habitual harassment.

This latest prank was the most insidious yet and had hurt him much more than the others. He wondered what these losers, who'd been kicked out of the local high school years ago and were still sponging off with their parents, would think of next to harass him. He could no longer ignore it. When he received his next social security check, he would buy a box of ammo for his shotgun. The next time they picked on him, regardless of the consequences, he would blow them to kingdom come or die trying. He wouldn't take it anymore.

The next day, he answered a knock on his front door. Two men in suits stood eyeballing him after he opened it.

"What can I do for you, fellas?" Gomer asked politely.

The two men simultaneously withdrew their IDs from their inside suit pockets and showed them to him. The taller

man said, “I'm Special Agent Fogarty, and this is my partner, Agent Kojak. We are investigating a series of malicious Halloween pranks that occurred this past evening. Some pervert inserted razor blades, slivers of glass, and tacks in candy given to the neighborhood children last night. Several of the victims are in critical condition due to internal bleeding.”

“That's terrible,” Gomer said, visibly distraught at the horror of such a monstrous act. “I can't imagine what type of person could do such a thing. I haven't heard of this type of mischief happening for quite a few years.” His face creased as if a sudden painful memory had crept into his thoughts, but he quickly dismissed it and said nothing.

Both agents noticed the sudden change in his expression from sadness and horror to a guilty recollection, but they let it slide for the time being.

“Did you have many trick-or-treaters last night, Mr. ...Ominous?”

Gomer didn’t like the accusatory tone of this question, and before he could answer. Kojak added, “I imagine you didn’t have many after you put the sign in the street with the dead cat. Were you trying to avoid handing out candy?”

“Actually, some of the local hoodlums put that sign in the street and scared away all the children, who might have come to my house. I wanted to hand out candy, and I spent a lot of my monthly social security check to have an ample supply on hand. I even bought a mask for the occasion, which I look forward to every year. Those miserable gangbangers ruined it for me, and I hope they rot in hell for their cruelty.”

“So, you didn't hand out any candy?” Fogarty asked as his partner wrote something in his notepad.

“Not a single piece. I didn't even open one bag. It's all going to waste. It probably won't be any good next year.”

Gomer saw the continued skepticism in their demeanor as they looked at the rotting planks on his front porch.

“Do I detect an insinuation in your tone?” Gomer said

sternly.

“Not really. We're going door to door asking all the neighbors if they saw or heard anything suspicious, and several mentioned your scary sign,” Fogarty explained.

“They said the dead cat was extremely upsetting to the children,” Kojak added.

“As I said, it wasn't my sign, and I didn’t put a dead cat in the street to frighten the children. I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“You certainly have a peculiar name, Mr. Ominous,” Fogarty replied.

“I didn't choose the name either. My parents gave it to me,” Gomer said flatly.

“You say you know who put the sign in the street?” Fogarty continued.

“Of course, I do. The same lowlife’s who threw rotten eggs at my house, battered my mailbox, and papered my bushes and trees.”

“Have you reported these harassments to the police?” Kojak asked pointedly.

“Many times, but since I didn't see the bastards when they did it, it's useless to report them.”

Fogarty exhaled. “Just for the record, who do you suspect?”

“The Ramos brothers did all of it. All three are vicious members of a gang. They are responsible for all of the mischief that goes on in this neighborhood. But since their older brother is on the police force, the authorities look the other way. No one will do anything about the terror they bring to all the senior citizens around here. The old folks know what would happen if they blow the whistle. Everyone is frightened, but I’m not. I’m eighty-five years old, and I’m not going to take it anymore.”

Both detectives saw the pent-up anger in his eyes. Kojak made another note on his pad.

“So, what do you plan to do about these repeated attacks on your personal property?”

Gomer saw his last remark had piqued both agents’

interest. “Why do you ask, Agent Fogarty? Maybe you’d better read me my rights before I answer any more questions.”

Fogarty looked him squarely in the eye. “Let me give you a piece of advice before you get yourself in trouble. Don’t take the law in your own hands. If you do, you could spend the rest of your days behind bars.”

“And what would you do if these hoodlums defaced your property, just let them bully you?”

“Be sensible. You don’t actually know the Ramos brothers did these things. How can you expect the local authorities to arrest someone because you think they did it?”

“Every one knows they did it, but the police won’t intervene with their brother on the force.”

“Well, Mr. Ominous. I'm not related to them, but unless you catch them in the act, I can’t help you either. No one can. But, I promise to look into the matter on your behalf.”

Gomer looked surprised by Fogarty's remark as the agents turned and headed toward their Crown Vic in the street. He watched them drive away and went back inside.

* * *

Three days later while the Ramos family ate dinner, a brick shattered the front window of the living room facing the street. They heard the roar of an automobile speeding away. The three brothers bounded through the front door into the street, but by the time they reached the sidewalk, they only saw a dark colored car turning the corner a block away.

“Who the fuck would've have the balls to break our window?” Dom Ramos bellowed in disbelief.

“Somebody who's tired of living, I guess,” his brother, Guido replied.

“And who might that be?” Rudy Ramos asked.

The three brothers looked at each other scratching their heads and drew a blank. Then Dom finally said, “You don't think it was that crazy old man, do you?”

“Who?”

“You know that dweeb on Shady Lane where we put

the sign on Halloween."

"It couldn't have been him," Rudy said. "He doesn't have a car. Remember that old wreck in the backyard that won't start anymore?"

"Well, who else could it be?" Dom said, with a clueless expression on his face.

"Don't know," Dom shook his head, and the brothers went inside.

Their mother was cleaning up the glass with a broom and a dustpan. The father said, "There's a message attached to the brick." He handed it to Guido.

These words were scrawled in black Magic Marker on a crumbling piece of paper: Beware the Ripper.

"What the fuck?" Guido barked.

"Who is this Ripper character? Is this some kind of joke?"

"It doesn't seem like a joke to me," Rudy said. They spent the rest of the night picking their brains about who this Ripper could be.

* * *

Two weeks later, when the brothers went to their Mercury Marquis parked across the street from their house, they found all four tires slashed with a note left under one of the windshield wipers that read: Beware the Ripper.

"What the fuck!" Guido bellowed. "We need to find this Ripper character and carve him a new asshole. If the gang gets wind of this shit, our reputation will suffer."

"Call Joe. We need to report this vandalism so we can file an insurance claim with Allstate," Dom said.

Rudy called their oldest brother, the police officer, to come out and file a report.

An hour later, Joe shared a brew with his brothers at the kitchen table. "So, Bros, who have you screwed over lately with your lame shenanigans?"

"What do you mean, Joe?" Rudy asked.

"I mean why are you nimrods playing pranks on innocent people like that old geezer on Shady Lane. I just got a call from an FBI agent, who says you put a sign in the

middle of the street to scare kids away from his house on Halloween."

"You mean the old man blew the whistle on us. He has bigger balls than I thought."

"I don't know who reported it, but this Fed named Fogarty asked me to check into it. He told me someone had reported me for not coming down on you screw-ups because I'm your brother." He let this sink in and then he said, "I blew the bastard off and told him to go fuck himself, but he said I hadn't heard the end of this, and if you clowns bother the old man again, there'll be hell to pay."

"You told him to go fuck himself. Cool." Dom chuckled. "That's telling him."

"This is serious. I don't want to hear of you messing with the old geezer again. He's off limits, do you hear?"

"Okay. Okay. He's off limits." Rudy repeated, trying to calm the waters. "We were just having a little fun."

"So, who do you think fucked up your tires?" Joe asked.

"We don't have a clue. He calls himself The Ripper."

"The Ripper? Like the guy who carved up the women in London?"

"Yeah. He pitched a rock through our front window last week and left a note."

"With Mama and Papa there?"

"Yeah," Rudy said, shaking his head. "We were all sitting at the supper table when it happened."

"And you didn't see who did it?"

"No. We just saw a dark colored car turning the corner a block away."

"You guys have stepped in some shit this time. I think you might deserve it after all the fucked up things you've done."

"I hate to hear you say that, bro," Rudy said, mocking a wounded expression.

"Anyway, be careful. Tell Mama and Papa I'll stop by soon."

"The four brothers hugged each other and went their

separate ways.”

* * *

Two weeks later to the day, someone poisoned the Ramos dog with hamburger laced with arsenic. On the front step, the apparent perpetrator had written in chalk: Beware the Ripper. The brothers continued to canvas the neighborhood, asking everyone if they’d seen anyone suspicious prowling around last night.

Everyone they talked with said they’d not seen a thing.

Just as before, the only one they could think of who might be holding a grudge was the geezer they’d harassed for so many years.

* * *

Two weeks later to the day after their dog was poisoned, the brothers found the four new tires they had replaced on their Marquis slashed with a note under the windshield wiper that read: Stay Away From Shady Lane. It was signed The Ripper.

That evening, they decided they were men, not mice. They borrowed their Papa’s Toyota Camry and drove to Shady Lane to talk to the old man.

They parked across the street in the shadows. The streetlight was still out, and the added darkness made everything seem even more creepy and foreboding. It was eight o'clock, and they didn't see a single light on inside the house.

“What do you make of no lights in the house at this time of night?” Dom asked, lighting a cigarette.

“Don’t know. Maybe he went out,” Rudy answered.

“Maybe, but it's unlikely,” Dom continued. “I don’t think the creep has two nickels to rub together. And, as far as I know, he’s never had a friend to his name. He's a real loner. He's been living by himself since I was a paperboy when I was ten years old. People on the street then were actually afraid of the old bastard. He had a lazy eye that looked half covered over with what looked like a spider web. I don't think it was real, and it looked really scary.”

“The first time I talked to him,” Guido recalled, “he couldn’t look at me with both eyes at the same time. One eye was looking at the ceiling, and the other looking at the floor. It was really creepy.”

“Where could the old bastard be?” Dom blew a perfect smoke ring. “It's too early to go to bed.”

“I think I see a sign on the door?” Guido said, squinting toward the porch. “I'll take a look.”

Guido got out of the car and headed for the old man's yard. He looked at the sign, walked back to the Camry, and got in.

“What did it say, Guido?” Rudy asked.

“It says the house has been condemned, and they will be tearing it down on March 10.”

“That's tomorrow.” Dom said. “Where is the old man?”

Suddenly a light crossed in front of the front window.

“Look at that,” Rudy whispered.

“Someone's in there. Who else could it be but the old man?”

The three brothers exited the car and headed for the dark, ominous structure shrouded in black shadows. Guido opened the front gate hanging by one hinge, and they bounded up the three steps to the landing.

With no hesitation, Dom rapped hard on the front door. They waited, but no one answered. An eerie silence hung in the air. An owl hooted somewhere behind the house.

“Hey old man, open up,” Dom shouted coarsely. “We’re not here to bust your balls. We only want to talk to you.”

They waited, but nothing stirred inside. The only sound was their own heavy breathing.

Dom knocked again, and through the glass panel in the front door, they saw a lit candle float across the interior behind a gauzy curtain.

Assuming the old man would come forth, they waited for a response, but nothing happened.

“What do you think?” Dom asked. “He’s in there, but he doesn’t want to talk to us.”

Rudy tried the door, and finding it locked, he removed a credit card from his wallet, stuck it into the crack in the latch, and after sliding it downward, the door creaked open a crack.

Darkness enveloped the interior as black as India ink.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Guido stammered. “You know what Joe said about hassling the old man.”

“Dom said boldly, “We came here to talk to the old man, and they're tearing the house down tomorrow morning. This might be our only chance to ask him about the Ripper. Stand back.” Dom pushed Rudy aside and rushed into the blackness. The others followed.

Once inside, they heard the sound of something heavy falling with a finalistic clunk behind them. Bright lights flooded the space within like a baseball stadium and blinded them. Ten figures emerged from all sides with baseball bats and iron pipes. A vicious series of bone crunching whacks sent the brothers to the floor, writhing, and screaming.

When they saw their attackers trade their clubs for machetes, they begged for mercy, but the men in black with red tarantulas emblazoned on their chests just laughed and kept hacking long after the screaming had stopped. When they finished, the room and everything in it were soaked with blood.

The Tarantula gang lifted the bar from the door, turned off the lights, and headed for a black van parked in the shadows down the street. The stench of death and bodily fluids emanated from the house like a heavy, suffocating curtain. Several rats scurried in through the open door. Later, an alley cat, a mongrel dog, and a raccoon joined them for a midnight snack.

The next day, when the wrecking crew arrived to demolish the dilapidated structure, the supervisor smelled the stench and went inside to investigate. After he spewed his guts over the carnage, he called 9-1-1.

Agents Fogarty and Kojak arrived shortly after the rescue squad and the CSI groups. After entering the house and looking at the crime scene, they both dry heaved and

bolted for a breath of fresh air.

“Christ!” Kojak barked. “It smells like a slaughterhouse in the dead of summer in there.”

Fogarty said, “It is a slaughterhouse, Partner.” He kept sucking in air like a fish out of water, withdrew a pack of cigarettes from his inside pocket, and lit up.

A uniform walked up to them. “I’m Toast. You're Fogarty and Kojak, aren't you?”

“The detectives smiled at the peculiar introduction, and Fogarty answered, “Yeah. We talked to the owner the day after Halloween. He said he had an ax to grind with some ball busters, who kept harassing him, and he was gonna get even.”

“Did you find any IDs?” Kojak said, unraveling the wrapper on a Tootsie Roll Pop.

“Yeah, the cash was gone if they had any, but we found three drivers licenses belonging to the Ramos Brothers swimming in the blood, gore, and shreds of clothing. We assume it‘s them, but we won’t know for sure until the autopsy.”

“These are the guys Ominous wanted dead,” Fogarty said. “I don't know how he did it, but he must have lured them over here and got a group of bad asses with pipe wrenches and machetes to waste them for him. Do you know about his history with the Ramos brothers?”

“Yeah, I know all about the problems he had, and I wanted to help him, but he never caught them red-handed. My hands were tied.”

Kojak shook his head somberly, “Now he’ll probably spend his final days in the slammer with some other gangbangers leaning on him. We warned him not to take the law in his own hands. I feel sorrier for the old man than these jerk offs, but I’d say this is an open and shut case, Toast. Have you cuffed him yet?”

“Didn't you see the wrecking ball outside?”

“Yeah, we saw it. What's that about anyway?”

“Mr. Ominous died the week after Halloween. Once the authorities inspected the structure of this place and

looked inside, they condemned the building. It was supposed to be demolished this morning. When the wrecking crew arrived, and smelled the bodies, they called 9-1-1."

"It looks like the rats had a feast in there," Fogarty groaned.

"It was more than rats," Toast added with a sour expression. "I saw a cat, an old dog, and a raccoon chowing down, too, before we shooed them away."

"Do have any idea who could have done something this depraved?" Kojak asked, sucking on a toothpick.

"It's obviously a gang thing. The Ramoses were members of the Dragons who are archenemies of the Tarantulas. They kill each other every month or so. I guess it was the Tarantulas turn to draw blood this month. Ominous must have found out about this rivalry and got word to the Tarantulas they were going to be here last night. They were waiting for the poor bastards with the bone busters and jumped them when they came in."

"Looks to me like they brought more than bone busters," Fogarty replied, as the coroner's crew wheeled out the first limp body bag."

"They just used the lead pipes to soften them up. Then, they sliced and diced them with the machetes and the chainsaw. It was one grisly sight," Toast exclaimed as the second limp body bag came forth.

"But how did Ominous get them here last night if he died several weeks ago," Kojak asked.

"That's the missing piece of the puzzle. I guess he or someone he knew arranged it beforehand."

"It's unlikely," Fogarty replied, "if he died right after Halloween. Did you search the premises yet?"

Toast nodded and said, "We did a cursory check and found a half a gallon of spoiled milk and a jar of pickles in the fridge. The pantry was full of Halloween candy."

"Halloween candy?" Fogarty asked, as another body bag was wheeled toward the parking lot.

"Yep. Four shelves full of it. By the way, did you guys ever find out who put the razor blades and such in the candy

on Halloween?”

“Nope. We still don't have a clue who did it?”

“Rumors were circulating Ominous did it.”

“Maybe, but I don't think so. Kojak and I talked to him about that, and he said the sign these dead clowns put in the street stopped the children from coming to his house. That's why he was so upset with them.” Fogarty turned to Kojak and said, “While we’re here, let's take a look at the candy.”

“Do you think there's something wrong with it?” Toast gasped with a worried look.

“I don't know, but I wouldn't eat any of it,” Fogarty said sternly.

“Damn, I saw Harry taking a few pieces off-the-shelf right after we arrived,” Toast said, scratching his head.

“Are you serious? A cop should know better than to tamper with items from a crime scene,” Kojak groused.”

“He said he missed breakfast, and he was starving.”

“Where is he now?”

“That's his car right there.” Toast pointed to a Crown Vic in the driveway. “He must be here somewhere. He began to shout, “Harry, where are you?”

The three of them started searching the house.

They went through the few rooms on the first level and then upstairs and didn't find Harry. When they opened the screen door to the back porch, they saw the police officer’s body on the ground just past the back steps. His hands still gripped his throat, and blood had run from his mouth down his chin and pooled under his head. His eyes were glassy and unseeing. He was dead, and his shredded tongue protruded from between his teeth.

“The hungry bastard choked on something in the candy. Old man Ominous must've been the Halloween killer after all,” Toast said, picking a Big Top candy wrapper off the ground.

“Maybe so,” Fogarty replied skeptically, “But if he was the killer, he sure was a good liar. He told us he never opened one bag of candy when we questioned him. And the way he said it was like he expected us to check on it to

corroborate his story. When we didn't check, he seemed disappointed."

"What did you expect him to say?" Toast asked, rolling his eyes.

"I don't know, but I don't see Ominous as the Halloween Killer."

They went to the pantry and found ten bags of unopened candy of various brands on the two upper shelves. The two lower shelves had sacks of loose candy and about thirty pieces of specially wrapped generic candy in a giant bowl. The wrapper they found on the ground next to the dead police officer's body matched several pieces in the bowl, but not the pieces in the unopened candy bags.

"The unopened candy may be what the old man purchased and not this generic stuff. Maybe he was telling the truth."

"Then where did the deadly candy come from?" Toast asked. "Everyone says the old man didn't have a friend in the world, and he hadn't had a visitor for years. Where did this mystery person come from?"

They looked at each other and had no answers.

Toast pointed to an obscure sign nailed to the wall outside the front door. "What's your take on the sign?"

"What sign?" Fogarty asked.

"Oh, maybe you didn't see it yet. Step closer."

A sign with barely visible letters that appeared to be scrawled in blood read: Beware the Ripper.

"That's what Joe Ramos told me was written on the notes his brothers got when someone threw a rock through their window, slashed their tires twice, and killed their dog," Toast explained.

"Who in the hell is the Ripper?" Kojak asked sucking a Red Devil fireball.

Toast shrugged his shoulders, and turning away, stepped back inside the house, holding his nose.

Moments later, the agents heard him retching his guts out moments later when the crime scene crew wheeled out several open stainless steel basins of skin slices, hanks of

hair, and bone fragments unidentifiable with a particular brother.

The agents returned to their Crown Vic. While Fogarty drove, Kojak ran the name Ominous through Motor Vehicles and found there was a Maude Ominous listed at the Shady Lane address for years until 2006. He also found someone named Jacqueline Ominous had a license twenty-five years ago that expired and was never renewed.

When the agents arrived back at the office, Fogarty started checking on the history of Gomer Ominous and discovered he had been married to Maude Snyder and had a daughter named Jacqueline, who had spent most of her life in a mental institution. He called the Rosewood Sanatorium where she had been a patient since 1984. “This is Special Agent Fogarty from the FBI. Can I speak with someone in authority who could tell me if Jacqueline Ominous is still a patient there?”

Fogarty was transferred to another line. It rang three times and a woman answered. Fogarty introduced himself again and repeated his question.”

“My name is Marjorie Flanders. I am the director here. I'm sorry, but I cannot give out information about our patients on the phone. You will have to come to the Sanitarium and fill out the necessary paperwork.”

“Look, Mrs. Flanders. I can get a court order if I have to, but that will take time and more people could die. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“I’m sorry, I’d like to help, but…”

“I’m not asking for the moon. I just want to know if she’s still there. A serial killer is on the loose who slaughtered ten children.” Fogarty winked at Kojak. “The coroner is scraping their remains into body bags as we speak.”

Flanders’ long silence told Fogarty he had struck a nerve with this remark. Finally, her rigid adherence to the rules softened and she said nervously, “This may cost me my job, but due to the extenuating circumstances, I want to help. Miss Ominous had been a patient with us for over thirty

years, but she escaped from our care while attending her father's funeral three weeks ago. We notified the authorities, and they have been looking for her ever since.“

“How did she escape?”

“Sadly, she brutally attacked her armed escort, who is still in critical condition. Somehow, she got her hands on a butcher knife from the kitchen and slit his throat. Miss Ominous is highly schizophrenic and is extremely dangerous. Do you have any information concerning her possible whereabouts?”

“No, I don't, but we suspect she may have arranged the murder of three individuals in Montclair, New Jersey who threatened her father, Mr. Gomer Ominous. Do you think it’s possible she could drive a car from Cleveland to New Jersey after being confined for all those years?”

“It's hard to imagine, but she took the keys of a Nissan Altima from the man she stabbed and drove it away. Miss Ominous is highly intelligent and very resourceful, in spite of her psychosis.”

“Can you tell me what caused her to be committed in the first place?”

Flanders thought about the rules regarding confidential information, and then continued, “Well, they can only fire me once. She butchered several students at college in her senior year and later confessed to doctoring candy with razor blades on Halloween. She poisoned and maimed quite a few children in 1984. Several of them died of internal bleeding. I hope this helps.”

“I'm afraid she's up to her old tricks,” Fogarty confessed more than he should have to Flanders. “We had an outbreak of mischief this past Halloween. Several children were hurt badly. One more question. It's a long shot, but…”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any idea if Miss Ominous has ever mentioned “The Ripper?”

“It's odd you mention that. Inside these walls, it’s common for a patient to believe he is someone else. Some

think they're Jesus Christ, or Napoleon, Elvis, or God knows who, but Jacqueline always had the delusion that she is a direct descendent of Jack the Ripper. Isn't that incredible? He was like a rock god to her by today's standards. She posted pictures she drew of him all over the walls."

"Mrs. Flanders, could you send me a fax of one of her most detailed drawings? It might help."

"Sure. I'd be happy to."

Fogarty gave her the telephone number, and five minutes later, the image scrolled up on his fax machine.

As soon as the agents saw the drawing, their mouths fell open in disbelief.

"It's Gomer Ominous," Fogarty exclaimed as he glared at the detailed portrait of a young man with one lazy eye drawn meticulously in charcoal."

"What does it mean?" Kojak asked. "No one ever found out who Jack the Ripper was, but he must have died decades ago."

"Keep in mind, Kojak, the note didn't say Jack the Ripper. It said the Ripper. Maybe Gomer really is a direct descendent of the monster who terrorized London, and Jacqueline is a chip off the old block."

The phone rang, and Fogarty answered, "Fogarty." Kojak saw his partner's face light up as he listened intently and made some cryptic notes on a pad. He saw his face darken and then pale in color from something the person was telling him.

After putting down the phone, he slumped backward in his chair, unable to speak for several moments, just staring into space."

"Who was it, Partner? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"It was Toast with an update. They found Jacqueline Ominous' body with her throat cut in a dumpster close to where the Ramos brothers' Ma and Pa live. The body had been in there for several days. Joe Ramos, the cop, told me someone slashed all four tires on his brothers' Mercury Marquis for the second time a few days before her body was

discovered. On the morning before the massacre, the mailman delivered a letter from The Ripper warning them to stay away from Shady Lane or else."

"Well. I'll be. I guess The Ripper is dead, and possibly the Halloween killer. Maybe we can close the book on this one, Partner."

"There's more. The boys down at the station put one of their ace techies on Gomer's past history. He found the old man became a sperm donor in 1984 and impregnated hundreds of women for over thirty years."

"Do they have any records on how many of the women went to term and gave birth?"

"They do, and he gave me the estimate the techies gave him."

"Well, how many potential psychopaths are walking the streets right now that are descendants of the London butcher?"

"The records indicate Gomer sired 79 children, who sired 115 children, who sired 203 more children. Toast says the genealogist they consulted estimates over a thousand new Rippers could be lurking in a dark alley somewhere in the world."

"No wonder there are so many nut cases like Dahmer, Bundy, Manson, Ed Gein," Kojak remarked.

"Mateo, I have more news. Some good and some bad. Which do you want first?"

While Kojak tried to decide, Fogarty said, "Do me a favor, ask for the good news first."

Kojak stared at his partner incredulously and started to sweat. He didn't like where this was going so he unwrapped a grape Tootsie Roll, one of his favorites, and popped it into his mouth. "All right, Partner. Let's have the good news first."

Fogarty said brightly, "Toast said they traced the candy, the arsenic, and the mind altering drugs to a local address, and they arrested the Halloween Killer, who confessed to all the heinous crimes during their interrogation. And can you believe it? The psychopath is one

of the descendants of Jack the Ripper from Gomer's sperm."

"Damn. That is great news," Kojak shouted jubilantly. "I wasn't sure we would conclusively nab the miserable child killer. It's almost a miracle, we got the lowlife scum. In my opinion, anyone who hurts a child should be drawn and quartered in the town square."

Fogarty's face darkened. "I'm sorry, Partner, but do you really mean what you just said?"

"Of course, I do. Whatever punishment we dole out is too good for any miserable degenerate who blatantly hurts a child. And when we finish with them, they will certainly rot in hell for all eternity for what they've done. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I don't want to curb your enthusiasm, Partner, but you're gonna find out soon enough."

"What?" Kojak said, wondering what could possibly be negative about everything coming together wrapped in a tight, beautiful bow.

"Remember in 1998, when you found out from the fertility doctor you couldn't have another child, and Louise and you adopted Madeline when she was four years old?"

"Of course. It was one of the happiest day's of my life."

"Madeline is the Halloween killer. She's the miserable degenerate and lowlife scum you just referred to. I don't know if she's gonna rot in hell for all eternity, but I know she's gonna fry in the electric chair."

# Red Hats Masquerade Ball

Hilda overheard a woman tell another in the swimming pool that the Red Hats were having a masquerade ball for October 31. To attend, the organizers had asked each member to wear a costume with red and purple colors and a mask. They also asked members to bring a gag gift costing no more than ten dollars to exchange at midnight when all the revelers would unmask.

Hilda waded closer to the two obese women and said, testing the waters, “I happened to overhear you talking about the upcoming Red Hats Ball at Lake Osceola Recreation Center. I was in the Red Hats Club in New Jersey for more than ten years before I moved to Florida. Is the party is open

to all Red Hats nationally or only local women?”

“I'm sure you're welcome to come if you like. I'll give you the address to send your check for the dinner, which will be twenty dollars per person.”

“How many people usually attend this type of function?” Hilda asked innocently.

“Oh, I'd say about a hundred women will sign up for Halloween. That's what we had last year.”

After sunbathing and reading for an hour, Hilda gathered her belongings. On her way out, she stopped to get the address to buy the ticket from the woman. She would arrange to pay cash under a false identity.

Hilda could barely control her excitement when she reached her golf cart. She had recently relocated to Florida after living with her late husband in an over 55 adult community in New Jersey for twenty years. She had lied about being a Red Hat. She loathed these types of activities and avoided them like anchovies on a pizza.

She’d already joined a bowling league and several bridge groups, but so far, as a single woman, no one had invited her to any functions in the neighborhood. In time, she would join some social clubs and get on some mailing lists. She needed more people she could wreak havoc on. The Red Hats Masquerade Ball was the perfect occasion to attend a party anonymously since she’d be wearing a full-face Halloween mask. She would make a brief appearance, plant the gift on the assigned table, and disappear into the night without anyone remembering she was there.

She would begin immediately in concocting a booby trap that would likely disfigure upwards of one hundred women. And, it was only three weeks way. This stroke of luck would allow her to enjoy her favorite pastime far sooner than she had anticipated. She felt an orgasmic tremor in her loins just thinking about it.

On the way home in her golf cart, she stopped at the community mailbox to mail three small boxes to random addresses in the neighborhood. It was amazing what you could order from medical laboratories under the guise of a

research facility. Hilda had first learned of this godsend while reading a novel by Robin Cook. As soon as she read the passage, she rented a P.O. box her hubby never knew about to receive the various hermetically sealed packets of diseases she ordered from the Internet.

Now, ten years later, she was still using the U.S. Snail to send bugs to people far enough away to avoid any threat to herself. She rarely targeted anyone specific; all of the people she infected were randomly chosen. Only once had she read of someone's death that she was sure she had caused. In her small way, her frequent mailings supported the failing postal service, which was a good thing. Unlike her, most people rarely mailed anything anymore. The boxes she placed in the mailbox on this occasion contained a particularly nasty strain of smallpox.

She had worked in a medical research facility as a young woman and knew how to handle contagious specimens. She had also spent a considerable amount of money converting a secret rental unit near the interstate into a laboratory complete with a decontamination area with insulated suits.

Next, she planned to mail happy-faced miniature dolls laced with nasty nodules of bacteria. These nasty little gifts probably not kill the people who opened them unless they had medical issues already. Nevertheless, they would definitely make them sick. Another insidious plus was the recipient's home would need a complete cleansing just as it would with asbestos or mold contamination, which would be quite costly. If a random victim's grandchild happened to be visiting when they opened the box, this could lead to devastating health consequences for their entire lives. "Life's a bitch," she thought, "and then, you die."

Hilda had plenty of time to make the surprise package for the masquerade ball, but she couldn't wait to get started. She had agonized over this creation for years. Now that Fred, her husband, had passed and her son had a family and a life of his own back in Jersey, it was time to let her creative juices flow.

She had found a blueprint for the diabolical device in a novel written by a soldier who disarmed booby-traps in the dark to enable his own forces to penetrate German bunkers during World War II.

Hilda loved surfing the Internet for new ideas to make other people's lives a living hell. After a satisfying salad for lunch, she went to Home Depot to purchase most of the items she would need for the device. The explosive components were the most difficult to acquire without being traced, but after greasing several palms the week before and almost being raped by a scar-faced pervert in a shabby section of Orlando, she secured the necessary materials.

Now that she was alone with no one to distract her, she could supplement her daily routine of pickle ball and golf with building booby traps in addition to her mailings.

Two weeks before the party, an old geezer cut her off in his golf car and almost caused a serious accident. The unpleasant encounter infuriated her, and after smiling as if nothing had happened, Hilda followed the reprobate home. The next day, she left a present for him in his mailbox. The snippet about the explosion in the Daily Chronicle the next morning was an unexpected delight. Apparently, the old fart had lost an eye and several fingers from the blast.

As the date of the Red Hat party grew closer, Hilda felt as giddy as a young girl getting ready for her first date as she imagined what would happen when the unsuspecting victim opened her surprise.

The only possible glitch in executing her plan was the weight of the package. Hilda worried that someone might be suspicious at how heavy this gift costing no more than ten dollars was compared to the others. She hoped when they lifted the small square package from the table, they might think it was a paperweight. Paperweights were heavy, but normally inexpensive.

It was unfortunate that the nails required to inflict the most damage had to be somewhat heavy. There were lighter alternatives, but according to the specifications of the device, a certain mass was necessary for each projectile to puncture

the skin and lodge deeply enough into the eye to inflict the maximum, irrevocable damage. The instructions were very specific on this point, and so, Hilda followed each detail to the letter.

On the morning of the long-awaited Red Hat event, Hilda received an email from Bradley, her son, informing her the family would stop for a visit on November 4. This was next Wednesday, four days after the party.

Since the rental unit housed all of the suspicious equipment and supplies she used for her booby traps and communicable diseases, Hilda had little to do to her villa to prepare for Bradley's visit. The storage building she rented was perfect, and she never received any mail concerning it since she paid cash in advance.

Hilda was disappointed the family reunion was so close to the party, but she couldn't wait to see her precious granddaughter, Penny. Seeing Madeleine, Bradley's wife, was a different story, but the women her son had dated before he married her were ten times more annoying. Madeline was a wonderful mother and homemaker, and she made more money than Bradley. She also had very ample breasts for him to play with. Her son had always gravitated to women with large breasts.

Hilda adored little Penny who looked a lot like her when she was a little girl. In fact, Hilda had pictures her father took with his Brownie camera that looked identical to Penny's pictures when the little angel was six years old. She knew she'd better enjoy her granddaughter now while she was little, because when she became a teenager, she'd never want to come to visit her old granny.

That afternoon, Hilda went to the shopping center and bought a very expensive Barbie doll, a cute little pink dress, and some wrapping paper and ribbons. She couldn't wait to see Penny's face light up when she saw the beautiful, but pricey doll.

When she returned home, she placed the two presents for Penny on the dining room table in a beautiful shopping bag adorned with images of Snow White and the

Seven Dwarfs. She used the pink and purple paper she bought at Macy's and a great big red bow to wrap the surprise package for the Red Hat Masquerade Ball. Hilda was sure her package would be one of the first ones selected; it was stunning and beautifully wrapped.

She was still worried about the weight, but there was nothing she could do about it. Going to the mall had taken more time than she thought, and she knew it would take about an hour to dress for the masquerade ball. Once it was on, no one would ever be able to identify her afterward. She was a master of disguise. It was critical that she not talk with any of the members in her normal voice.

Since Hilda had already checked the parking lot and the security cameras, she knew just where to park and where to walk to avoid being filmed as much as possible.

She wished she could record a video of the explosion, but she would be long gone by midnight.

The package about the size of a small box of Tide would detonate as soon as the top was removed like a jack in the box. It would send out hundreds of small nails and shards of glass that would pepper everyone around it.

She remembered the subdued carpet at Lake Oceola that would soon be soaked with blood. She imagined most of the members would lose one and possibly both eyes. This was without a doubt the most diabolical bloodletting she had ever conceived. It would certainly produce headlines on a national level, and possibly around the world.

She couldn't believe no one else had tried this before. After all, anyone with a subscription to *Popular Mechanics* could have constructed the device by following simple directions.

She thought of all the wasted years when her obsession to inflict pain was put on hold while raising a family. The twenty-year inactivity had been maddening, but faced with the same alternatives again; she knew she would do everything the same. Bradley, her loving son, and Penny, her precious granddaughter, were more than worth any sacrifice she had made.

Suddenly, Hilda felt a sharp pain in her left arm. It felt like someone had stabbed her with an ice pick just above the elbow. The intensity of the pressure was so strong she could hardly catch her breath. Was she having a heart attack? What a disastrous stroke of bad luck to have a heart attack on the very day she had planned to make history. She could see her name on the marquee of life with names like Dahmer, Manson, and Ted Bundy. Hell, Jack the Ripper only killed five women for sure, and probably no more than eleven at most.

"Oh, well," she thought, "there would be other parties." She rose from her chair and attempted to reach the phone in the kitchen, only a few feet away. She hoped she would still be able to function and not be totally debilitated if she was having a stroke.

As she reached for the wall to keep from falling, she thought about the bottle of aspirin in the kitchen cabinet above the phone. She would bite into a few pills after she called 9-1-1; sometimes, aspirin could prevent an oncoming heart attack.

Releasing her grip from the doorway to stretch for the phone, an even sharper pain in the center of her chest paralyzed her and sent her sprawling to the ceramic tile. Her head hit the front of the dishwasher on the way down. Her nose flattened with a thud on the floor, and one arm bent at an odd angle behind her back.

As she laid there, a catatonic lump, locked in one continuous excruciating pang of sheer agony, she could feel her mind shutting down. Tiny stars pulsated in the consuming blackness behind her eyes. "No!" she screamed silently inside herself, "don't let me die like this! Please, God, cripple me, let me suffer in eternal damnation, but don't let me die with the package on the dining room table."

* * *

When Bradley saw several days of the *Daily Chronicle* in the driveway when he drove up to the house with his family on Wednesday, he feared the worst. His voice quaked with emotion as he opened the car door, "I've got a

bad feeling something is wrong. You and Penny wait here while I take a look."

Bradley went to the front door and rang the doorbell. There was no response. After getting the same message several times on the answering machine, he found the spare key under the flowerpot, unlocked the door, and went in.

Immediately, Bradley detected the sweet, overpowering stench of death in the closed space. Someone had once described the smell as rotten meat laced with cheap perfume. Only a few steps inside, he caught a glimpse of his mother on the kitchen floor. Her face had turned a purple color, and there was a small pool of dried blood circling her head. He surmised she had hit her head on the ceramic tile floor.

Madeline pushed open the front door called out, "Bradley, is she all right?"

"No, dear," he said, starting to sob, "Mother has gone to heaven."

* * *

Five days later, Bradley, Madeleine, and Penny returned to the house after the funeral and a small luncheon for the people who attended from the adult community in New Jersey. They planned to return to Paramus the next morning.

Bradley had contacted a realtor to sell his mother's home as quickly as possible. They would return later to go through his mother's personal items and decide what they wanted to keep. They would discard the rest or donate it to Goodwill. Madeline wanted a few pieces of the jewelry, and they had always adored the large picture hanging over the sofa in the living room.

Penny had loved the beautiful dolly and the pink dress they found in the shopping bag on the dining room table, but her parents had made her wait until now to open the wrapped package lying next to it. They thought it must be a very special gift since grandma had wrapped it so beautifully in pink and purple ribbons with a big red bow

Madeline hefted the present and shook it. "Gee,

Bradley, what could this be? It’s so heavy for its size.”

“I'm clueless,” Bradley replied, “but whatever it is, I'm sure it will have a special meaning to Penny since it will be the last gift her grandma gave her.

Penny looked at her mother in frustration as Madeleine removed the red bow and cut the ribbons with a pair of scissors. “Mommy! Let me open it,” Penny whined, jumping up and down with anticipation.

# Something in the House

In the middle of the night, a loud noise that sounded like two pots striking each other awakened Gary from a deep sleep. Sitting up, he peered through the open door of the master bedroom into the landing on the second floor.

“Gwen, I heard something,” he whispered, nudging her under a mountain of covers. “I think someone’s in the house.”

He waited for a response but got only an uninterested groan and continued heavy breathing.

“Remember,” he said softly as he rolled out of bed, “you don’t know the passwords to the bank accounts if anything happens to me.”

When Gwen, still submerged in heavy blankets, answered with a snort, and started to snore even more loudly, Gary crept silently to the doorway. Looking both ways

down the length of the hall, he listened for more sounds.

Momentarily, he heard the rattle of glasses in the china cabinet in the dining room. Sliding to the floor, he crawled to the railing and peered down into the black living room. He heard the refrigerator door open, then the sound of ice falling and liquid filling a glass. Apparently, whoever was creeping around in the dark on the first level was not attempting to be silent.

Had Gwen allowed someone to spend the night without telling him? He didn't think so, but why would someone robbing the house be so brazen to make more noise than a bull in the proverbial china shop? Was this more than a robbery? The thought chilled him.

Gathering his nerve, he took a deep breath and rising to a standing position shouted, "Who's there?"

After a pause, an unfamiliar voice answered from below, "My name is Randolph."

"Randolph?" Gary repeated, searching his memory for a connection. Finding none, he replied, "I don't know any Randolph. What the hell are you doing in my house in the middle of the night?"

With no hesitation, the voice that reminded him of Boris Karloff answered with a lisp, "I used to live here many years ago with my mother and sister. It was a quiet night in the cemetery. A perfect evening for a midnight stroll, and I thought I'd stop by for old time's sake."

*"*Was this some kind of sick joke*?"* he thought. "Did some lunatic escape from a loony bin?"

"How did you get in my house?" Gary demanded.

"I used the key under the flowerpot on the porch. I always use it when I come to visit. You know you should consider finding a less obvious hiding place. Really, why even lock the door?"

Suddenly, Gary heard something fall and break in the den. "Is someone else here with you?" he inquired more meekly.

"Yes, Donald and Francene, my brother and sister, came with me, and we found a few more hungry friends

along the way," said the creepy voice from the kitchen."

"Why are you walking around in the dark? You're making enough noise to wake the dead." Gary winced as soon as he said the words, and trying to recover, replied, "Why not turn on the lights?"

"We like the dark," Randolph said eerily.

"Look, enough of this nonsense. I don't know what planet you came from, but you can't just barge into someone's home at this or any other hour just because you lived here years ago. Leave now, or I'll call the police. You're scaring my wife."

Randolph, unperturbed by the threat, chanted in a whimsical voice, "'Liar, liar, pants on fire, hang them from a telephone wire.' Your wife is here with me, Gary, and she's not scared. At least, not anymore."

"Now, who's lying?" Gary shouted. "Gwen is sleeping in our bed in the master bedroom. I can hear her snoring through the doorway gather your friends and leave immediately, or you'll spend the rest of the night in jail. This is your last chance."

"That's not your wife you hear snoring," Randolph declared boldly, "it's my sister, Francene. Your bedroom was hers when she lived here forty years ago. I'm surprised you didn't smell her."

Hearing more voices below, Gary turned on the light in the upstairs hall with the wall switch. His jaw dropped when he saw three pale women in hospital gowns shambling into the living room from the kitchen. His blood ran cold as he watched them craning their necks upward toward him like hungry birds, and began to smack their lips menacingly.

"Where was his cell?" he thought, in a frenzy. Then, he remembered leaving it to charge on the kitchen counter just before bedtime.

Standing paralyzed with fear at the top of the stairs in his boxers, he watched three more figures shamble into the living room and join the others ogling him with their malevolent, ravenous stares.

"What do you want?" Gary screamed." Whatever it is,

take it and leave. Please!”

At this remark, Randolph and his friends began to snicker, and then burst into a fit of maniacal laughter. The six drooling women with hungry eyes and slobbering jaws lumbered single file up the staircase toward him.

Gary shuddered in terror at the grisly fate that would befall him if they got their hands, or should he say claws on him. He turned to flee into the master bedroom, but moving toward him from the doorway, he saw something surely from the grave. It had a hideous pocked face, rotten teeth, and a long tattered gown clotted with damp, wormy earth.

Recoiling backwards from the horror, his flight catapulted him headlong over the rail of the balcony. His piercing scream drowned out the uproarious Happy Birthday greeting from his wife, friends, and neighbors flooding into the hallway and the living room to begin the celebration. In midair, when someone turned on the lights in the dining room, Gary saw the monster from the master bedroom pulling off her rubber mask and looking down at him from the railing with sad eyes. It was Janine, his next-door neighbor.

In the seconds before Gary lost consciousness after breaking his neck on the ceramic tile floor, he saw the entire room fill with balloons and confetti. Gwen looked ravishing in her favorite cocktail dress blowing a noisemaker and tossing a streamer into the air. A huge banner with the words, “Happy Halloween, Gary on Your 40th Birthday… A Night To Remember” was the last thing he saw before the grim reaper gobbled him up.

Gwen had done it again. She had planned a truly memorable party that no one in attendance would ever forget.

Gary died on the same day he was born, October 31.

# Masquerade

My name is Fenwick Warner. I am the master of ceremonies for this year's ghoulish festivities of the Madeira Club's Halloween gala. No expense has been spared for tonight's journey into the abyss of unspeakable terror. The exquisite cuisine has been provided by some of Europe's most celebrated chefs. Brad Simmons, a distinguished member of the entertainment committee, hired a travel agent to provide us a castle in Transylvania to hold the party and requested all the bells and whistles he could provide to make this affair as authentic and unforgettable as possible.

At about ten o'clock, the travel agent had provided more than anyone had expected in terms of gourmet

delights, spirits, and unmitigated horror. The gala, without question, was the best party that we had ever conceived in our history. We were finishing a fabulous serving of crème brûlée and opening another bottle of blood red wine when I surveyed the guests at my table. The ambiance was perfect. The candles were dim and flickering eerily, and the cadence of the music was spine tingling as I took note of the bevy of horrific heads that encircled my table of twelve. The Devil sat on my right and the fiendish Frankenstein monster to my left. I placed the goblet that stood before me to my lips and let the scarlet liquid run down my throat.

Suddenly, my eyes beheld the menacing sight of a vampire directly across the table from me. Before the toast, I was sure that a werewolf had occupied that seat. His eyes glared at me, and a smile caressed his lips as two fangs protruded past his bottom lip.

Suddenly, there came a knock on the oaken door and another horrific figure entered the room. The light of the full moon washed over the interior through the open door, and a mysterious burst of fog flooded the room. A fiendish voice on the intercom announced it was the witch from beyond the marshes. She cackled loudly as her mole-infested hand swept a goblet from a serving tray to propose another toast. This was one of many monsters that had made a spectacular entrance during the evening. Each was incredibly authentic and awe-inspiring, but of all the monsters that attended the party, the vampire, who sat at the table across from me, was the most frightening.

The evening of mayhem and monsters went on and on until the hour of midnight. Then after a countdown, just as the second hand reached twelve, all arose and a tremendous roar of laughter filled the room. The cloaks dropped, the masks were removed, and all the lights were turned on. Everyone was finally free to reveal their identity, and most were astonished at who had played the role of the famous movie monsters.

Everyone was pouring another glass of wine when a sudden hush fell over the crowd. In all the confusion and

merriment, no one had noticed until now the person who'd come to the party as a vampire had not unmasked. He stood alone in a menacing stance at the far side of the room. His penetrating eyes swept the crowd and blood trickled from both sides of his mouth. A cruel smile curled around his pointed incisors.

My heartbeat began to accelerate as the room fell deathly silent. Every eye was fixed on the vampire.

"Enough is enough, my good man," I said in my role as the master of ceremonies. "Please remove your mask and let us see who you are."

Suddenly, a tremendous gust of wind burst through the open door. The lights began to flicker violently to the point of being extinguished. The cloak of the vampire fell to the floor as his body faded into a cloud of smoke and the wings of a bat materialized in its place. All stood aghast as the ebony form fluttered over the dining room table and departed through the front door that had blown open. The howling wind outside subsided to a whisper, and the lights returned to normal. Someone turned on the large chandelier, which illuminated every corner of the room.

I heard a scream and turned to see Henry McIver pointing to the protruding hand of the masquerader disguised as a werewolf beneath a corner table. Upon further inspection, with his werewolf mask removed, we saw Brad Simmons' dead open eyes and two bite marks in his neck, still dripping blood.

Suddenly the night was filled with the howling of wolves and the incessant flutter of bat wings that cast disturbing shadows upon the landscape in the moonlight. The crystal chandelier began to flicker as large bats flew into the room through the gaping open door and one by one materialized into a vampire.

Above the bestial cacophony of shrieks and snarls that prevailed outside in the courtyard, the voice of the travel agent that we had hired to arrange our trip to Transylvania came on the loud speaker.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed the

festivities so far. Brad Simmons, who indicated he had always wanted to meet a real vampire, has gotten his wish, as you have seen. In accordance with Brad's strict instructions for authenticity and our guarantee to host a Halloween party to end all Halloween parties, rest assured before the sun comes up tomorrow morning, each one of you will meet a real vampire. I am confident this will be something you will remember for the rest of your lives."

I discarded my Cuban cigar in a goblet of brandy and dashed into the coatroom to hide among the coats and scarves. I cowered in the shadows and watched as each vampire sought out a companion for the evening.

Moments later, the coats parted suddenly, and a pale corpse-like face appeared from the gloom. His cold bloodshot eyes looked over me as if he were evaluating a choice steak at the market. His lips parted, and I saw the long pronounced incisors and heard the slurp of his red bloody tongue as he extended a pale hand and said, "Would you care to dance?"

# The Vampire Club

When Mike entered the kitchen for breakfast, he noticed the basement door was open. Peering into the darkness below, he called out for his wife, Debbie, and Kyle and Amber, his son and daughter. There was no answer.

“What are you doing, honey?” Debbie asked entering the kitchen and seeing Mike looking down the stairs.

“The door was open, and I thought you might have gone to the basement for something.”

“I rarely ever go down there anymore. It’s just a storage room since we converted part of the garage into a laundry room.”

Kyle and Amber sat down at the table and started filling bowls with Raisin Bran.

“Do you still play games on the card table in the basement?” Mike asked, pouring milk on his cereal.

“No, Dad.” Amber replied. “There are too many boxes piled everywhere. It’s too creepy. Since Mom doesn’t wash clothes down there anymore, there’s a spider web on every column.”

“Hey, that sounds like a good job for the two of you. Take a vacuum cleaner down there and spruce up the place. Let those spiders know whose boss.”

Without responding, Amber sprang from her chair, followed by Kyle, and raced outside to catch the bus to the middle school.

Mike looked at Debbie, still perplexed about the open door to the basement.

“If you and the kids didn’t go down there, who opened the door? It was closed when I went to bed.”

“Do you think you might be sleepwalking again?” Debbie asked, slicing a banana.

“I haven’t done that one time since we moved here three years ago. I think I’m over that, don’t you?” Mike responded defensively.

“I hope so, but I can’t think of another explanation. In any case, let’s say we give up on the mystery of the open door and get on with our lives. Maybe the door wasn’t completely closed, and it popped open when the furnace kicked on.”

Smiling, she added, “You don’t suspect the paranormal, do you?” Mike also smiled and continued with his half-eaten bowl of cereal.

After breakfast, they cleaned up the dishes and left for work.

* * *

At 3 a.m. the following night, Mike, unable to sleep, heard a strange rustling in the ductwork. He proceeded down the stairs to the kitchen and found the sound was

coming from the basement. Opening the door, he turned on the light and descended the stairs.

Reaching the bottom, he traced the rustling sound to the sliding doors facing the backyard. Through the glass, he observed an abnormally strong wind causing the branches of a shrub to scrape the sliders at ground level. He made a mental note to trim the bush back in the morning. Turning toward the stairs, he noticed something dart across the floor and disappear behind a stack of boxes piled in the corner.

“Was that a mouse?” he thought. “He’d never had a mouse in any house he’d owned and didn’t know what to do about it, but again, it could wait for morning.”

After breakfast, while trimming the shrub back from the sliders, he saw his next-door neighbor picking up the morning paper in his driveway.

“Hey, George, last night, I saw something run across the basement floor. I guess it was a mouse. Have you had any trouble with mice at your house lately?”

George chuckled and smiled broadly, “You forget, good neighbor, I have Shaharazod. I pity the poor rodent that makes a home in my house.”

“That’s right,” Mike remembered. “George owns a big Persian cat.”

“You’re welcome to borrow her for a day if you like. She loves to hunt.”

“I sure would appreciate it. I was going to call an exterminator, but perhaps Shaharazod will get the job done faster.”

“I’ll bring her over when you get home from work.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then Mike left in his car for work.

* * *

When Mike pulled into his driveway that evening, George brought his large orange cat to his house. Together they placed it in the basement with a litter box and a bowl of water and closed the door.

While Debbie and Mike were watching TV that

evening, they heard a commotion below and hoped Shaharazod had been successful in ridding the basement of the mouse.

The next morning, after Debbie and the kids had left the house, Mike turned on the light and descended the stairs to check on the cat's progress.

On the left side of the enormous space in front of the stack of boxes, he saw a bloody pile of orange fur. The feline's underbelly had been torn out, and both eyes were hollow sockets.

Mike stood aghast in disbelief, dumbfounded by the grisly sight before him. What on earth had attacked George's cat with such ferocity? It must have been a monster rat or some other larger animal. The mangled, half eaten remains, and particularly the black, empty eye sockets, filled his senses with fear and horror so severe, he bounded up the stairs two at a time. Reaching the landing, he quickly slammed the door and struggled to catch his breath. Moments later, he ran to the bathroom and vomited up everything he'd eaten for breakfast.

Scary things affected Mike much more than the average person. He never watched any movies or television shows in the horror genre. During his first year of marriage, he'd experienced terrifying nightmares of ghosts and goblins. He had to take a medley of anti-depressants to control violent seizures that threw him into a frenzy without warning. After being institutionalized for six months with a rare chemical imbalance, the malady had disappeared as mysteriously as it had arrived. The nightmares had cost him his first marriage, and the thought of those dreadful feelings returning scared him. Debbie knew some of what had happened to him before they had met, but there was so much more he hoped she would never know.

After his breathing returned to normal, he looked around the dark shadows of the basement and agreed with what Amber had said at breakfast, the basement was very creepy, particularly with an unidentified varmint lurking in the shadows.

He called George, giving him the bad news and a heartfelt apology for such an unexpected outcome. George immediately rushed over.

Mike answered the front door, and together they descended the basement stairs with wary apprehension.

Upon seeing Shaharazod mutilated beyond recognition except for the orange fur, George began to sob uncontrollably. Placing his arm around his shoulder, Mike led him upstairs, and offered to bury his pet for him if he wanted him to. George nodded his approval.

That afternoon, Mike shoveled up the remains of Shaharazod in the basement and buried her in George's back yard under an elm tree. He was relieved that the debilitating terror he'd experienced earlier had not resurfaced.

Both families attended a brief ceremony and said a few words to commemorate the pet's passing. George's little girl said Shaharazod had gone to pussycat heaven, and Debbie placed a small headstone of slate on the ground to mark the gravesite. After a time, the group disbanded and returned to their houses.

The next day, Mike planted five large rattraps with cubes of cheese as bait around the perimeter of the 600 square foot space. After placing the traps, he didn't waste any time returning upstairs.

At 4 a.m., Mike, unable to sleep, thought he heard the front door, and then the basement door open. He listened in the darkness. Debbie was snoring softly. He tensed when he heard the sound of someone creeping up the stairs to the bedroom level.

Mike eased from the bed, tiptoed to the doorway of the master bedroom, and peered into the hallway. He saw the outline of a dark figure reach the landing, pause, and then disappear into Amber's room.

"Amber? Is that you?" he whispered.

After a pause, Amber replied, "Yes, Dad. I was thirsty and went to the kitchen for a glass of water."

"I thought I heard the front door, and then the

basement door open."

"It must have been something else you heard. I didn't open either door. I just got a glass of water."

"OK, back to bed. 7:30 comes early on a school day."

Mike waited in the hallway until he finally heard heavy breathing from Amber's room. He crept silently down the stairs and stood in the shadows of the living room.

He listened. Nothing.

Checking the front door, he found it locked, and proceeded to the basement door and eased it open. Peering into the blackness below, he listened intently for movement. The hairs on his neck stood on end when he heard a strange creak from below. It sounded like the opening or closing of a door that needed lubrication. He stood motionless for another fifteen minutes and couldn't think of a door in the basement that could have made such a sound. Was it the small utility window at the ground level? Finally, he closed the door and returned to bed.

He lay there listening to the night sounds of the house and wondered why Amber had lied about opening the doors.

The following day after the kids had left for school, Mike told Debbie about the incident with Amber the previous night.

"Did you ever consider that your imagination might be playing tricks with your mind? I know you're still upset by the death of George's cat, but are you positive you heard the doors open?" Debbie asked.

"I'm sure. And yes, I am upset about George's cat. You didn't see what I shoveled into the trash bag. I can't imagine what kind of animal could have caused such severe injuries. Shaharazod was a huge cat." He paused, staring at the skeptical look on Debbie's face and continued, "And where is the beast now? It would take a helluva mouse hole for something that big to crawl through."

She looked at him with the same expression she'd had several days before, "Should we be calling Fox Mulder in to investigate? Do we have a ghost or a monster in our basement on Loving Forest Court? Are you having

nightmares again?" Debbie instantly regretted what she had said, but couldn't take the words back as images of the dreaded past returned for both of them.

"I don't have nightmares anymore." Mike said meekly.

She looked deep into his eyes as if to read his inner thoughts. "If you have any suspicion that your nightmares are beginning again, please see the doctor about putting you back on your medication immediately. You know how critical it is for all of us." She lovingly caressed his hand.

Mike's face reddened, and then he smiled reassuringly and held her close. "I'm fine. Don't worry. I'm just upset about Shaharazod. I promise you I'm not having any symptoms of my old phobia." He hoped he was being truthful for all their sakes.

After Debbie left for work, Mike decided to take a look at Amber's room to see if something there would provide a reason for her to lie.

When he entered her room, the recent changes to the décor stunned him. A huge poster of a Vampire Club character adorned every wall. Intermingled with these poses of bare-chested creatures with fangs protruding from their lips were several *Twilight* posters from the *New Moon* and *Eclipse* movies.

Looking around, he saw two novels by Anne Rice on her desk and a dog-eared copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* on her bed. Totally bewildered by the sudden fascination with vampires, he couldn't understand what on earth had happened to his fourteen year old daughter since he had visited her room only a few weeks before.

He left Amber's room and walked down the hall to Kyle's room. When he opened the door, the raven-haired vampire that hung on the wall in front of his son's bed startled him. He found two fake vampire fangs on the dresser and a bottle of vampire blood on the end table with two DVD's of the *Twilight* movies.

He wondered what Debbie would say about this.

That night the family held a meeting in Amber's room.

"Can you explain this?" Mike said pointing to the

posters.

"I am a member of the Vampire Club, and like many of my friends at school, the characters and stories in the *Twilight* books and movies fascinate me," Amber explained.

"What's wrong with Justin Beiber or Timberlake or whoever girls of your age idolize?" Why vampires?" Mike questioned.

"Please, Dad. I'm really into vampires. You know Kyle and me have always loved horror movies. I don't care about those lame baby faced teen idols. They bore me."

Debbie looked at Mike exasperated, "I don't see why you're so uptight about posters. Every teenager has posters on their walls, and some are much worse than these." Amber nodded her head in agreement.

"You should see what Todd and Mark have on their walls," Kyle piped in. "They have nude girls with their throats torn out in a bathtub full of blood."

"Jesus!" Mike replied shaking his head. "And their parents allow it?"

Debbie grabbed Mike by the arm and escorted him from the room. Kyle and Amber looked at them as if they were aliens from another planet as they disappeared into the master bedroom. They heard their parents arguing for a time, and then they heard the sound of the TV in the living room.

The next day Mike took a baseball bat he kept under his bed with him to the basement and inspected the traps, which were free of dead rats. The cheese in all five traps appeared to be untouched.

Looking through the yellow pages for an exterminator, he arranged for a service call for the next afternoon.

He hadn't seen George since the burial ceremony, so he went over and rang the doorbell. After a time, George answered.

George stood in a daze looking at Mike.

"Are you OK?" Mike asked with concern.

"I'm not sleeping well. I can't get over what happened to Shaharazod."

“How are Trish and JJ?

“They’re fine. Why do you ask?”

Mike told him about the Vampire Club, and George pointed to the room at the end of the hall on the first floor. They proceeded to it.

Even before he reached the doorway, Mike saw a huge poster of a beautiful, scantily clad vampire lying on a white bearskin rug.

“How old is JJ?” he asked.

“He’ll be fifteen next month,” George said sleepily, popping a pill into his mouth. “I had playmates on my wall when I was sixteen, but teenagers are much more mature now. Look at the movies they go to see.”

Mike noticed a red splotch on the right side of George’s light blue turtleneck. “Is that blood on your neck?”

Staring blankly at the wall, he replied, “I cut myself shaving this morning.”

“Where’s Madeleine?” Mike asked, looking about the house inquisitively.

“She’s visiting her mother in Pittsburgh.”

Mike returned to the front door. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“As good as can be expected. I feel like a zombie from the sleeping pills I’ve been taking.”

“I’ll check on you later. Maybe you should see a doctor. You don’t look so good.” Mike walked outside and headed for his house.

On the way, he saw Larry, his next-door neighbor on the other side of the street, pulling weeds and stopped to say hello. After some small talk, Mike mentioned he might have rats or some other varmint in his basement.”

Larry had obviously imbibed on one too many martinis and spoke like he had a mouthful of marbles, “No, I dunno anything about any rats.”

In the kitchen window, Mike saw Larry’s teenage daughter peering down at him. She looked as if she was going to a Halloween party. Her eyes were circled with heavy, black makeup, which made them look more sunken.

Her face was as pale as a corpse, and she was wearing a black, low cut dress. He waved to be friendly. She reciprocated with a smile and also flaunted a fistful of black fingernails. He did a double take when he saw the protruding canines and her blood red tongue. He tried to salvage the moment with a lame gesture of understanding, but he knew that she knew her appearance had rattled him.

Turning away, he continued his conversation with Larry, “How old is Elisha?”

“She’s thirteen going on thirty, and lately she’s been bitten by the vampire craze.”

“I’ll say. It seems like every teen in the neighborhood is obsessed. The sun was fading on the horizon, so Mike left Larry to pull more weeds.

An eerie feeling crept over him as he returned to his house. Closing the front door, he peered down the familiar, suburban street.

The wind stirred in the trees as the sun disappeared, and the streetlights came on. In the shadows of the branches that hung over the sidewalks, Mike saw several indistinct figures advancing from the end of the street. As they grew closer, he noticed several more join them from the adjacent houses. All of them wore black. The males had long flowing capes draped about them, and the females wore ankle length black lace gowns. All were pale with dark makeup around the eyes just like Larry’s daughter.

Mike moved into the shadows of some shrubbery. He watched his daughter walk from the opposite side of the house and join the others on the corner under the streetlight. He noticed Elisha among them, as well.

In a few minutes, a black van embellished with scarlet lettering, which read “THE VAMPIRE CLUB” and a shocking vampire face with blood dripping from his lips pulled up. Eleven teens piled into the van, and after a slight pause, it drove away.

Mike rushed back to his house, hopped into his Volvo, and began tailing the van.

In no time, the black vehicle with the vampire face

arrived at its destination, which was the high school football field.

Spotlights illuminated a small stage located between the goal posts at one end of the field. Several hundred teens, all dressed in the same vampire garb as those in the van, had already arrived. A melancholy dirge set the mood for the event from loudspeakers positioned on tripods beyond the rectangular platform.

From the left, six pallbearers carried a black coffin to the stage. Three large monitors, suspended from the goal post, came to life. Clips from old and new vampire movies flashed on three screens.

As the event progressed, the monitors began broadcasting live feeds of the teens in attendance. Parked in the shadows across the field, Mike couldn't believe his eyes as he watched the affair through his binoculars. The frenzied crowd responded to each ominous image and sound.

When scenes from the *Twilight* movies came on the screen, the crowd exploded with approval.

The fright fest continued with one ghastly clip after another until a drum roll quieted the crowd. This signaled the beginning of the main event.

From out of nowhere, three large wolf-like animals bounded upon the stage. The three vampire cameramen zoomed in so that everyone in the crowd could see the beasts with graphic clarity on the monitors. All three animals wore black makeup that made their eyes and their jaws more horrifying than an actual wolf. Mike recalled the Sherlock Holmes story of the *Hound of the Baskervilles* where the culprit had disguised a large dog to look like the "hound from hell" with eyes that glowed in the dark in hopes of scaring the young Baskerville heir to death.

In addition to the bone chilling, sunken, yellow eyes and the bared, gnashing teeth, the body of each beast was black and woolly with fur so thick, it made each animal appear twice its actual size.

The crowd screamed with fear and delight as the lid of the coffin began to rise. A layer of dense fog swept over the

stage floor and spilled into the crowd. Out of the fog, the cadaverous face of a young vampire seemed to float toward the microphone at the front of the platform.

The three wolves started howling, and the vampire said," "Listen to them, the children of the night. What beautiful music they make."

The audience cheered at these familiar words from *Dracula*. His hypnotic eyes and long, pointed teeth dripping blood filled all the screens. Several large bat-like creatures emerged from the fog, soared upward above the light poles, and disappeared far off in the distant sky.

Suddenly, the vampire glared in Mike's direction. Caustically pointing his long pale finger, he screamed, "Unwelcome Intruder!"

The three wolf dogs bolted from the stage and ran toward Mike, who bounded from the shadows and ran for his life to his Volvo. Jumping into the driver's seat, he sped away throwing gravel as he fishtailed into the road. Looking back in the rear view mirror, he didn't see any sign of the wolves.

Upon returning home, Mike sat on the living room sofa in the dark. He wondered what the Count had said to his club members after he left. Did he have them in some kind of trance, or were they just having fun pretending to be under his spell? He couldn't dispel the terrifying experience from his mind. The bizarre encounter with the wolf dogs had been so completely devastating; he couldn't keep his hands from shaking and his teeth from chattering even now.

He remembered his embarrassment and humiliation when he watched his first horror movie at a friend's birthday party when he was ten years old. They were all engrossed in watching the movie *Mr. Limpet and the Haunted House* starring Don Knotts. The film was a comedy, not a horror picture, but while everyone else was laughing their asses off, he sat frozen in fear. The movie scared him so much; he couldn't watch most of it. His friends, who had seen many real horror movies, noticed his pitiful state of terror and laughed more at him than the movie. Branded a wuss until

he left for college, high school had been a lonely time because of that one humiliating incident that ruined his teenage years.

Was he overacting to the Vampire Club because of what had happened at that fateful birthday party? What would have happened if those vicious dogs had caught him before he got to his car? How had they disappeared so mysteriously? Was it all his imagination?

When Debbie came home that evening, he told her what had happened.

She laughed so long her sides started aching.

“Mike, I’ve seen the *Twilight* movies, and I slept like a baby after each one of them. Teenagers love horror. Now, more than ever. Just because a Don Knotts comedy about a haunted house scared you as a teen is no reason to inflict your phobia on everyone around you. Get hold of yourself. Maybe you should see a shrink.”

He looked at her in disbelief, appalled by her lack of understanding in light of his phobia regarding scary things. He thought of telling tell her what had happened to him at his initiation into the Phi Sigma Epsilon fraternity in college. This experience had been ten times worse than the birthday party she knew about.

When he’d found out what the frat brothers had planned for Hell Night, it was too late to turn back. He and the other plebes had to spend the night in a haunted house to join the frat. After they used every terrifying prank imaginable to scare them to death, the frat brothers decided to bury them alive in a coffin in a graveyard for three hours. The experience had caused his nervous breakdown and had sent him to a mental institution for six months. He was about to tell all when Debbie caught a breath from her laughing attack.

“By the way, the mystery of the dead cat has been solved.” Debbie wheezed, gasping for breath. “Amber let the president of the Vampire Club’s dog, Corky, stay in our basement the same night you put Shaharazod there to kill the mouse. She figured it was okay since we never use the

basement except for storage. Vlad, her boyfriend, couldn't take his pet with him to a convention that night, so she thought it was the perfect solution. She didn't know Shaharazod was there until the next morning. Amber is very sorry about what happened to George's cat, but it really wasn't her fault. It was just an unfortunate accident."

Mike looked at her as if she had two heads, but didn't try to argue. He thought of the horrible beast Amber had brought into their home. It was more like a wolf than any dog he'd ever seen, and he certainly wouldn't want to come upon it in the light of day much less in the dark of his creepy basement.

"Oh, one more thing. About those open doors." Debbie said matter-of-factly with no consideration for how badly the incident at the stadium had upset him. "Amber let Vlad stay in our basement a few times instead of him spending money on a motel. She knew you'd overreact if she asked for your permission and again because we never used the basement, she didn't think you'd ever know."

Debbie turned to him, and seeing the look of disbelief on his face, said, "I think she did the right thing, based on the circumstances and your phobia, don't you? After all, what's wrong with a young boy spending the night in our basement?"

Mike thought of the unexplained open doors the night Amber lied, but held his tongue and departed into the den. The thought of Vlad creeping about their house in the middle of the night while he was asleep made him shutter. The possibility of the corpse-like creep sleeping with Amber in his own house made his blood run cold.

He watched TV for a while, but couldn't concentrate. At about two o'clock, he went to bed. Praying for a good night sleep after so many restless nights in a row, he listened to Debbie's heavy breathing and closed his eyes.

It was hopeless; the images of the show at the football field weighed heavily on his mind and were resurrecting the dreadful feelings that had plagued him before his breakdown. He felt the migraine beginning to

hammer in his temples. He could feel the barriers he had built against the old monsters starting to crumble as he plummeted deeper into an abyss where only dead things live. He could no longer hide from the dark shadows of teeth and claws tearing at him in the darkness. His eyes rolled backward in his head as the nightmares began just as they had so many years before.

He found himself in a black forest running as hard as he could to outrun the howling pack of wolves behind him. He could feel their hot breaths on the back of his neck. Large bats swooped down from above as he darted back and forth, and kept running.

He tripped over a root and went sprawling. He saw a group of teenage vampires approaching in the distance. Their eyes glowed in the dark, and in the light of the full moon, he saw their white pointed teeth. Backing up against a fallen tree, he watched the wolves bounding toward him. His heart pounded in his chest as he emptied his bladder and picked up a baseball bat lying on the ground on a bed of leaves. Scrambling to his feet, he saw Amber in her vampire gown rushing toward him. He felt her long nails rip down his cheek as he sidestepped and swung the bat with all his might. Her pale face exploded as the side of her head caved in from the blow. He saw the fury in her remaining eye as she struggled to her feet with her bloody claws groping. A vicious downward swipe took out the other eye, and she crumpled in a bloody heap at his feet.

With his adrenalin flowing like a river through his sinews, he caught the first wolf in midair with a bone crushing upward thrust as the beast's gnashing grisly teeth opened to grip his throat in a death lock. When he looked down at the wolf's battered head, he saw the open eyes of his son Kyle staring up at him.

The horror of the son's face startled him awake. The forest and the monsters had disappeared. He found himself in the upstairs hall of his home on Loving Forest Court amid the twisted, battered remains of his wife and children still swinging the bloody, baseball bat.

# Viral

"Shit," Edwin Hawk said, when his cell phone rang, and he saw Mandy's name on the display. He made his living as a freelance photographer, working the homicide beat. Hawk had given his assistant strict instructions not to call him tonight unless something uncommonly juicy came on the police band. After listening for fifteen seconds, he jumped up and took a final look at the TV and his friends guzzling his beers and eating his munchies.

Before the call, Hawk had been as happy as a pig in

shit, watching the seventh game of the World Series. The Yankees led by one run in the bottom of the eighth. The Dodgers had tied the series three games to three two nights ago. Hawk had a two hundred dollar bet on the Yanks and he didn't want to miss the ninth inning and the celebration to follow if the Yankees won. Maybe the Dodgers would tie it up and it would go into extra innings but he doubted it with Rivera on the mound.

"You're leaving now?" Brad Turnbuckle asked in disbelief.

"Mandy called after I told her I'd fire her ass if she interrupted the game without an incredibly good reason. She knows how much I love the World Series, particularly when the Bronx Bombers are in it."

"What's more important than this?" Turnbuckle asked, cramming more Doritos in his mouth.

"Apparently a Jack the Ripper wannabee carved up some whore in an alley near 30th Street. From what Mandy heard on the wire, it's a real puke fest. She thinks it could make a great picture for the front page of tomorrow's morning edition. If she's right, a close-up might be worth five Gs if I can get there before the other assholes that cover the homicide beat. Sorry fellas, hold my winnings on the game until I return."

Hawk scurried away as the potential tying run entered the batter's box on the enormous flat screen TV.

As expected, he found the traffic lighter than usual as he crossed to the East side. Everyone was glued to his set except The Ripper, some unlucky detectives at the crime scene, and him.

Hawk pulled along side another car and double-parked. He saw bright lights in the alley across the street and several police officers cordoning off the area with yellow tape.

The first officer recognized him as he approached. "Hey Hawk, how's it hanging? We're missing the final game of the series covering this shit."

"Tell me about it. The CSI crew hasn't arrived yet,

huh?"

"No, but they're on their way."

"You think I could take a quick shot?" He handed the officer a twenty-dollar bill and winked.

"Sure, make it quick and stay behind the yellow tape. And for God's sake, don't step on the loose eyeball lying in the pool of blood there at the edge."

"Jesus," Hawk winced. "The psycho really did a job on her, huh?"

"I'll say. Try not to puke all over the crime scene or they'll have my ass for letting you through."

Hawk rushed forward to the edge of the tape, and getting as close as he could to the young woman splayed on the sidewalk, he snapped several close-up shots. He also took a great shot of the eyeball resting on a crack in the sidewalk. The poor prostitute looked particularly vulnerable in her birthday suit with her legs spread for the whole world to see. And, she didn't look her best without a nose, which the killer had lopped off. He'd left one eye socket a bloody hole and her other eye dangling on a shred of tissue and resting on her left cheek.

Hawk grimaced with each bloodcurdling shot. He had to pause and take a few deep breaths to steady himself. The psycho had sliced away the flesh on both sides of her mouth and tapered the corners upward, which made it look like the poor woman had a Cheshire cat grin. Her perfect, white teeth shone brightly on a bed of blood.

Hawk knew he'd struck gold with these hardcore pictures. He couldn't sell these photos to even the Post due to the graphic content, but he could sell them to the sickos who would pay some heavy coin on the Internet. The prostitute's sad end would make this night a great payday for him. Possibly the most profitable he'd ever had. Mandy, his girl Friday, had a nose for the horrific and a nice ass to boot.

When Hawk returned to his brownstone, the game was over. Matt Kemp had homered with one on for the Dodgers and the Yanks had bitten the big one once again and lost. His friends had gone to some other watering hole to

mourn. It had cost Hawk the two hundred dollars he'd bet, but that was a drop in the bucket to what he would make on the photos. The News and the Post had agreed to pay $2,000 for the crime scene shot because of the horrendous blood loss, and he had wangled $3,000 for the face and body shots from crimescenehorror.com.

Hawk thought of the unfortunate young hooker with the disfigured face and thought of his pictures of her going viral on the net. A pang of guilt swept over him and he felt he might puke his guts out at any moment. He knew he would never forget the images of the victim that would haunt him to his dying day.

Hawk was having a smoke outside on the steps of his brownstone when the paper delivery came at around 3 a.m. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the huge headline, Ripper Strikes in Manhattan, and his photo on the front page of *The Post*. It wasn't the money shot, but it was terrific.

He turned the page to where the story continued. Yes! The paper had included a doctored money shot. He could even see a glimpse of the whore's hideous sardonic smile through the upper part of her legs on this photo. The woman's left boob had been grayed out and her thigh had hidden the beaver shot just as he'd planned. He couldn't believe how far certain newspapers would go to sell papers. It was disgusting.

The photos he'd sold to *The News* were also tasteless but far less sensational. He couldn't wait to see what they had done.

Hawk went inside, pulled up the webpage for crimescenehorror.com, and clicked on "Recent Pics." *Christ.* There it was, his totally sick and disgusting shot of the prostitute's bloody smile for the camera right between her legs.

*Jesus, what kind of coldhearted monster would take such a depraved shot? Would $7000 justify his stooping to such an all time bottom of the barrel low?* He actually thought it did. He just wouldn't write home to mother.

All the next week Hawk received phone calls

lambasting him for his poor taste in photojournalism by upstanding citizens. He also received compliments on the size of his balls for submitting such controversial photos to the two newspapers."

"Fuck all of them if they can't appreciate great graphic photography," Hawk bellowed aloud to no one, erasing all of his messages and belching from the green peppers he'd eaten on a takeout pizza on his way home.

After another week had passed, the controversy had died down. The photos he'd taken since the Ripper killing barely moved the needle on the horror meter. He couldn't wait for the deranged psychopath to strike again. Then he realized how sick it was to think that way since another poor woman would have to die to satisfy his greed for another big payday.

As if by magic, just as he got in his car the next night, he heard the police band crackle and then the message he'd been waiting for, "The Ripper has struck again. A woman's body has been found in an alley at 319 30th St."

Hawk floored the accelerator and threaded his way through the traffic toward the East side.

As he turned the corner, the street was dark. The businesses in this area closed early. There was no one on the street. As Hawk drove forward, he saw bright lights in the middle of the block, a police car, and two strands of yellow tape across the alley. A lone police officer stood in front of the tape. About ten feet behind him, he saw a nude body lying next to a dumpster partially illuminated by a spotlight.

Hawk pulled into one of the many empty parking spaces, grabbed his camera, and exited the car. As he approached the officer, his elation subsided a tad since he didn't recognize him. He hoped this newcomer would know the drill and let him get closer to the corpse so he could get some great shots.

"Hey officer, I'm Edwin Hawk, freelance crime scene photographer. You mind if I snap a few shots for the morning paper?"

The officer looked at Hawk incredulously, "Don't you

have something for me?" he said, grudgingly.

Hawk's worry evaporated and he peeled off a twenty from a roll of bills from his pocket and handed it to the police officer. The bill quickly disappeared into the officer's pants pocket as he motioned for him to proceed. "You know the drill, stay behind the tape and make it quick. The crime scene crew will be here any minute. I think I hear the sirens now."

Hawk rushed to the edge of the yellow tape and peered through the lens at the body lying in a pool of blood ten feet away. He zoomed in for a close-up. Immediately he saw the nude body of a man, not a woman. He could see the man's ample penis perched on top of his balls as he stooped for a shot of the face between the man's hairy legs. The victim's face was intact. There didn't seem to be a mark on him other than the gaping slit across his throat still oozing blood.

After taking five rather mundane pictures of the crime scene, Hawk turned and flinched when he found the officer standing behind him. "The police band said this was another Ripper killing," Hawk said, his face creased with obvious disappointment.

"That's odd. We received an anonymous call about a dead body in the alley and we came to check it out. I don't think it went over the police band."

"Believe me, I heard it in my car five minutes ago."

The officer said nothing.

Then, Hawk noticed an earring hanging from the officer's left earlobe and a serpent tattoo on his neck. He'd been standing in a shadow when Hawk arrived and he couldn't see it clearly. *That's strange*. *He didn't know the police department allowed cops to display tattoos and body piercing even though such adornments were common by the public.*

The man in the uniform saw Hawk's questioning look and wasted no time bringing his billy club from behind his back and clubbing the photographer across the temple, sending him to a pile on the sidewalk.

"Hawk, you've been scammed," The Ripper crowed joyfully. "I broke into your car earlier and tuned your radio to an alternate channel. I left a transmitter in your car so I could tell when you got in. It worked perfectly. As soon as you sat behind the wheel, I called you before you noticed the channel wasn't the normal one."

Hawk could hear the voice, but he couldn't move from the hard blow he'd taken to the head.

"In case you're wondering, the corpse is the policeman I found walking his beat. He came when I called for help. I clubbed him with my stick and removed his uniform so I could wear it for you before I slit his throat."

He dragged Hawk's body farther into the alley, removed the yellow tape, and turned off the spotlight, illuminating the staged crime scene.

The street was as still as a tomb as The Ripper removed his surgical tools from a small case inside a duffel bag and started to rant, "I hate you media people who profit from the pain and misfortune of others. Now you'll get to know what it's like firsthand."

The dazed photographer managed one futile cry for help before The Ripper sliced off his tongue.

As Hawk began to drown in his own blood, he thought of the horrific picture he'd taken of the hooker that would go with him to his grave.

The Ripper, whistled joyfully while he worked, making serious modifications to the photographer's face, starting with slicing off his lips and ears. Hawk lay there semiconscious; obsessing over how much some asshole photographer would charge *The Post* and *The News* for the photos of his corpse. Would the photographs of The Ripper's work on him go viral on crimescenehorror.com? Of course, they would.

The Ripper sliced away Hawk's shirt, trousers, and then his underwear.

The last thing Hawk heard was the insane giggle of the psychopathic lunatic. Even after The Ripper placed a long blond wig on his head, rouge on his cheeks, and a

padded bra on his chest, Hawk didn't grasp the full thrust of his maniacal fetish for staging his victims until the final whack.

# Something in the Sky

Chad and Elise reclined in the backseat of Chad's brand-new Camaro on Halloween night. Chad was hopeful this would be the night Elise would let him do more than just feel her up and tongue lash her for several hours. The high overlook was the most romantic place to make love in the county. Probably thousands of coeds had lost their virginity in this very spot. Condoms of all colors decorated the bushes along the parking lot. Chad hoped the moon on the lake would put Elise in the mood to let her guard down and hopefully her panties.

Since tonight was their fourth date, he thought it was time to do the wild thing. After all, on the last date, he had taken Elise to a fancy French restaurant, Le Pierre, which was far more expensive than a college student would normally spend. Certainly, after that extravagance, she must know it was time for some payback. Still, each time he pulled a zipper down, she pulled it right back up.

Suddenly, in the sky far across the other side of the lake a bright light appeared. The light was so dazzling Chad had seen it with his eyes almost shut in the throes of passion. It grew brighter and bigger as it rocketed toward them, moving much too fast for them to react or run for cover. Luckily, the object soared over the roof of the car and crashed into the trees behind them.

Chad lifted his lips from Melissa's left nipple and looked through the back glass. The meteor or whatever had cut a black hole through the underbrush, encircled by patches of fire. Elise's head popped up, and she stared in wonder at the fiery circle of destruction and the steam rising far into the distance.

"What was that thing, Chad?" she asked, wide-eyed. "It came awfully close to crashing into your car. My ears are still ringing."

"I think it was a meteor. You know, a falling star."

"I thought they always burned up when they entered the Earth's atmosphere."

*"Wow! Elise was not only a fox; she must have a brain, as well.* He quickly added, "Not always. I guess this one was too big to burn up completely."

"You don't think this could be a monster from outer space, do you? It reminds me of the way *The Blob* started."

"You mean that old flick from the 50s with Steve McQueen?"

"Who is Steve McQueen?" Elise asked blankly.

"Never mind."

"Do you think the woods will turn into a raging inferno?"

"Nothing's happening so far. I don't think the fire is getting any bigger. Do you?"

"Well, no," Elise frowned. "But I think this is a bad omen, and we should leave."

"Leave? What do you mean, Sweet Thing? We were just getting started, and guess what I bought at the drugstore just before I picked you up."

Elise groaned. "I told you, Chad, I'm all for us making

each other feel good, but popping my cherry is something I'm saving for that very special person. Someone I want to spend the rest of my life with."

"Aren't I special to you? This is our fourth date. You must like me some already, and with time, I'll grow on you more and more once I find out what turns you on. I thought we were making some pretty great music together. It sure sounded that way from all the moans of pleasure you made when I sucked your titties."

"Please, Chad. Sex and love are two different things. You're very handsome, and you have killer abs. I can't deny you turn me on. And, riding around in your new car is really cool, but I'm saving my virginity for my knight in shining armor."

"Feel this," Chad beamed proudly, his huge biceps bulging from his muscle shirt. "I'm a dragon slayer first class."

Suddenly they both heard a loud crash behind them like a tree had fallen not far away.

"What was that?" she gasped, straightening up and looking fearfully into the darkness.

"The meteor probably damaged a tree, and it fell over. Forget about it. Look how beautiful the moon is on the lake." Chad snuggled closer to her and unloaded a long passionate kiss on her warm, sensuous lips. He heard her make a small cry of emotion deep in her throat, and he immediately began to fumble for the zipper on her jeans.

"Chad!" she barked. "Don't you feel the weird electricity in the air? It's all around us. Is getting into my pants so important you're blinded to the impending danger we may be facing? There could be little green men marching toward us right now. They could be surrounding the car if we're not careful."

*Damn. He thought that last kiss had unlocked the door to her cold, cold heart.*

They heard a strange, eerie screech of what sounded like a wild animal, but unlike anything either of them had ever heard before. Through the windshield, they saw a

dense fog swallow the moon and then it started creeping across the water toward them.

“Chad, for gods sake, zip up your pants, and let's leave before something comes for us out of the fog.”

“Elise, my darling, how can you break my heart like this? Can't you see how madly in love I am with you?”

*She couldn't believe the bullshit he was spouting. They barely knew each other. How could he have fallen madly in love with her after a few dates?*

“Chad, I'm sorry if I’ve done something to lead you to believe this is anymore than a make out session. I like you, but that's it. I'm studying to be a neurosurgeon like my father. I plan to go to med school where I will hopefully meet someone with the same goals and aspirations as myself.”

“Is that why you don't love me? Because I’m not going to be a lawyer or a doctor like you. I’ll have you know my grades are good enough, but I'm on my way to the NFL after college. You know I'm leading the conference in touchdowns and yards passing.”

“Sorry. I really didn’t know. Football doesn’t interest me, but I wish you all the best in a professional sports career. I want my husband to be my soul mate and come home to me every night. I want him to make at least as much money as I do so we can raise a family and have a wonderful life making whoopee till death do us part.”

“It sounds pretty boring to me. I don't want to be tied down to a life where every day is like every other. Come with me on a magic carpet ride of thrills and chills where we can go as far as we can dream and not be stuck in a life of mediocrity.”

“Chad, while you've been trying to get into my pants, the fog is so dense, we can't even see the lake anymore.”

They heard something metallic ding the back bumper, and they smelled something foul seeping into the car. The fog billowed around them, and suddenly visibility was almost non-existent.

“Did you hear that weird metallic sound on the back of the car?” Chad said mysteriously with a look of horror on

his face. “And do you smell that awful alien stench in the air? I think your greatest fears have come true.”

“What do you think it is?”

“There’s no doubt, something from another planet has landed on Earth, and it’s coming to get us. We’re FUCKED!”

Elise screamed and looked around both sides of the car for something green and awful to emerge from the fog.

Then, Chad broke into a fit of uproarious laughter. Elise looked at him incredulously; amazed he didn't seem to be the slightest bit worried about the strange noise or the awful smell. He was even making a joke of it.

“Please, Chad. Stop trying to scare me. You know how spooky stuff bothers me. I told you I had nightmares after that horror movie the other night.”

“For God’s sake, Elise, you’re going to be brain surgeon, and you actually believe in monsters?”

Elise stewed for a moment over that remark and finally said, “I've been kind to you and wished you well on your career. I could’ve said your future is completely predicated on your ability to perform. If you blow out your knee or your arm, all your dreams are out the window, and you’ve got nothing to fall back on. I could have asked how long the average quarterback lasts in the UFL or NLF, whatever? That is, if you ever get there.”

“Wow. You know, Elise, when I saw your tight little ass swiveling across the campus, never in my wildest dreams, did I imagine what I hateful bitch you could be. It's a good thing for both of us we had this little talk. I thought I was madly in love with you when I picked you up, but now, I consider you one of the most obnoxious cunts I've ever met. Rest assured from this point forward, I wouldn't give you the sweat off my balls.”

“Then get your meaty hands off me, and take me back to the dorm.”

“Look outside the window, bitch. We can't go anywhere until the fog lifts.”

They sat in silence enveloped by the fog for an interminable amount of time. Then Elise said, “Look, Chad.

I'm sorry I said what I said; I'm sure you'll do fine in the SFL."

"NFL, Elise." He said still steaming.

"Sorry."

They resumed sitting in silence for a time, still seething from the remarks both had made.

Elise finally said, "I need to pee really bad. I can't wait any longer. I've got to go now, but I'm afraid to get out of the car."

"Well, you can't piss all over the seats of my new Camaro for Christ sake. Get out and pull your panties down next to the car. I promise not to look."

She saw him smile sheepishly, but she had no choice. She had to go. So, she unlocked the car door and stepped into the fog. Leaning against the side of the car, she lowered her panties and relieved herself.

Suddenly, Elise heard the sound of a crowd of people moaning all around her. She saw the tops of several half-eaten heads bobbing up and down in the swirling mist and scurried back inside the car.

"Chad! I think I saw zombies in the fog."

"You think you saw what? I don't know what kind of game you're playing now, but I don't believe in any supernatural bullshit. So, don't waste your time telling me about zombies. There's no such thing."

Suddenly, A hideous face filled the driver's side window behind Chad. The face of something still moving, but obviously dead. Its gray flesh was pocked, and several earthworms squirmed in the thing's matted disheveled hair. Its nose was a black hole in the middle of its face. One of its eyes hung on a shred of tissue from its cheek.

Elise screamed and couldn't stop screaming. Chad shook her, trying to make her stop. But she just kept screaming and staring at the hideous face lapping the window glass behind Chad with its black tongue.

Then another putrefied face with earthworms protruding from several orifices appeared in the passenger side window. Chad recoiled in horror, and finally realizing why Elise was screaming, he started screaming, too. As the

deformed face sucked and slobbered across the window, a parade of the dead from a nearby cemetery shambled alongside both sides of the Camaro.

Suddenly, both car doors were wrenched opened, and fetid, bony hands gripped both of them and dragged them out of the car onto to the ground. A ghoulish, decomposed creature from the wormy depths ripped Elise's clothes to shreds with superhuman strength while its graveyard friends held her down. Then, it crawled on top of her and began ravaging her. Before she passed out, she saw the salacious leers of the things waiting their turn. Not one of them looked like her knight in shining armor.

A group of nymphomaniac female corpses with ravenous sexual desires held Chad down on top of a marble slab and taught him a thing or two until he passed out from projectile vomiting.

* * *

The next day, the police and a vanload of county personnel came to investigate the aftermath of the meteor that had crashed near Crystal Lake the previous evening.

The sheriff and his deputy found thirty-one coffins exhumed and overturned along the black path of destruction the meteor had cut through the cemetery. They found the corpses scattered over the hillside and the parking lot bordering the lake. The ME, Andy Mayberry, and his staff had placed the remains in body bags and transported them to the morgue for further analysis.

Police officers also discovered two incoherent college students lying on the ground next to a brand new cherry red Camaro. Their tongues were shredded, and their vocal chords paralyzed from screaming, but their wallets identified them as Chad "Golden Arm" Magnum and Elise Buxom.

The initial newspaper article indicated that an undisclosed number of grave robbers had orchestrated the gang rape of both college students by male and female corpses strewn about the area. Every orifice of their bodies teemed with big, thick earthworms commonly found in graves. Both the star football player and his date were

effectively brain dead. The trauma they had undergone had reduced them to slobbering, mindless human vegetables, who would be confined to an asylum for the rest of their lives.

The bizarre incident became the only thing county residents talked about as they waited for the DNA results to explain what had really happened to the two college students who'd become permanent residents of the Morningside Sanitarium.

Finally Mayberry received the DNA results and he finished what he knew would be the most controversial report he would ever file. He called Barney Walnut, a long time colleague and drinking buddy to review his findings prior to its release.

They met in the morgue during an autopsy Andy was conducting on a woman whose American Indian husband had skinned her alive. He turned off his microphone when Barney entered the room. Andy went to his desk, picked up the final report, and handed it to his colleague.

"Can we go into your office," Barney asked, wincing from the skinless female torso on the metal table.

"If you can stand it, I need to finish this autopsy. I'm working on a rush for Lieutenant Thursday, who needs the info for a hearing tomorrow morning. I spent forever on the two college students who were gang raped after the meteor crashed, and I'm way behind."

Barney started scanning the report, and after reading awhile, he said scratching his head. "You indicate the tomb raiders manually penetrated the woman with fifteen of the male corpses strewn about the graveyard. Andy, how can you even write something that absurd in the report? We both know a stiff, pardon the pun, can't get it up after being dead for…ahhh…the freshest one had been in the ground more than five years."

Mayberry put down his scalpel, just as the woman on the table expelled a pocket of gas noisily. Barney groaned as Andy replied, "There is certainly no precedent I can find in all of medical history for an erect penis after death, but the DNA

from the decomposed penile flesh and rotten tissue I found of the corpses in Miss Buxom's vagina proves it conclusively. There is no doubt they raped her. I even found bloodworm viscera inside her like I found inside of them. Moreover, what other conclusion is there. The grave robbers must have staged the rapes, since the rapists were dead."

"What kind of sick perverts would think of doing something so depraved?" Barney's gaze fell upon the raw exposed flesh of the skinned woman on the table, and he started to wretch. For a moment, Mayberry thought his colleague would upchuck all over his paper-strewn desk.

"For God's sake," Mayberry barked. "Go outside if you're going to puke."

Barney managed to control his involuntary inclination to throw up, and after a brief recovery, he continued, "And what about this…sperm… you found? Does that mean one of the tomb raiders raped the woman in addition to the fifteen corpses?"

"Can't you read? It's all in there. When I discovered the sperm, that's what I thought at first, but the DNA indicates the sperm belongs to the quarterback."

"You really found traces of his DNA in nine female corpses scattered around the parking lot?"

"Absolutely. It was hard to tell his parents what I found, but that's why I get paid the big bucks."

Neither of them could muster a laugh from this remark as Barney continued, "You went out on another limb by suggesting the perpetrators must have mounted nine worm-infested dead women on top of Chad "Golden Arm" Magnum while they held him down."

"That's the only conclusion I can come to, no matter how bizarre it may sound. We found bruises and lacerations on his wrists and ankles. The evidence indicated the corpses themselves held him down. However, since no sane person would believe that, I stated the grave robbers manually orchestrated the women raping him."

Why would these perverts go to all the trouble to have fifteen different male corpses gang rape the woman and nine

different female corpses gang rape the man? And how could they do it without leaving behind a trace of their own DNA?"

"They had to be wearing HAZMAT suits or some kind of insulated uniforms not to leave DNA."

"That's crazy, Andy, and you know it."

"What other conclusion is there other than there were no grave robbers, and the corpses themselves raped the students."

"And you can't put that in your report without being committed to the nut house," Barney said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Mayberry shook his head. He'd been working around the clock for days and he smelled almost as bad as the skinned corpse in front of him. "I doubt we'll ever find the supposed perverts who did this because in my opinion, they don't exist. I believe the meteor brought the dead back to life, and instead of eating their victims like in the movies, they were hungry for sex with the first humans they came upon."

"That really is a more plausible scenario that the bullshit you wrote, but you can't suggest the dead came back alive." Barney closed the file and placed it on the desk. "Well, I guess the sperm means the quarterback and the coed had sex before they were both reduced to vegetables in the final attack."

Mayberry shook his head and replied, "I can't explain it, and I won't even try, but the evidence shows Chad "Golden Arm" Magnum as the last one to have sex with her."

"Last? Come on, Andy. Someone must have contaminated the crime scene. I know Chad had a reputation as a ladies man, but how could he get it up with her after fifteen decomposing corpses had brutalized her before him, and he'd been gang raped by nine horny female corpses?"

"It couldn't have been much fun because she was all ripped apart inside, but I checked it three times, Barney. You've heard of sloppy seconds and thirds. The quarterback was sloppy sixteen, and I do mean sloppy."

Together, they puked all over the skinned corpse on

the table, Mayberry’s final report, and his paper-strewn desk.

# Black As Night

The Thompsons lived in a dilapidated farmhouse on a gravel road about ten miles from Route 11 in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It was a cold Halloween night in 1963, and the family of four had just finished eating dinner.

Norman Thompson looked out his window at the expanse of his property as he pondered the chores he would do the next day. By the light of one naked hundred-watt bulb, Emily, his wife, stitched a checkered quilt in the corner of the living room. Their teenage sons, Hank and Jeb, lay exhausted on the front porch after a hard day's work bailing hay.

Jeb struggled to his feet from a hammock and flexed his aching muscles. He took a rock from his pocket, and

after winding up like a pitcher on a mound; he hurled it as far as he could in the direction of the eerie, abandoned house across the road. The sound of glass breaking in an upstairs window of the weather-beaten structure shattered the stark silence of the desolate country landscape.

"Damn, Jeb, that was a hellacious throw," Hank complimented as he leaned off the side of the porch and spit out a big chaw of tobacco juice. It won't be long before you've broken the glass out of every window."

"That old house gives me the creeps. I wish somebody would come along and bulldoze it."

"What would be the point? Sam Johnson's whole parcel is nothing but a pile of rocks. I'll bet that house will fall down before anyone comes to knock it down. It's just not worth the bother." Hank scratched his oily black hair and continued. "Do you know what day it is?"

Jeb paused for a moment and then replied, "Hey, I almost forgot after liftin' all those bails of hay all day. It's Halloween, and I know what you're gonna say before you even say it."

"Last year, on this very night, with a full moon blazin' just like tonight, we heard the sound of that horse. The hoof beats sounded so strange…like thunder," Hank whispered in his spookiest voice.

"I'll never forget how scared I was," Jeb piped in as he peeled a scab from his thumb.

Hank jumped up from his rocker, and like an actor on a Broadway stage, he motioned in the distance and shouted, "And lo and behold, the horse had a rider, both as black as night." And then he continued in his normal voice, "He looked like he was goin' to a Halloween party, dressed in black from head to toe and wearin' a mask so you couldn't see his face and a cape blowin' in the breeze like some kind of vampire."

"If it weren't for the moon, we'd a never seen him at all."

"But we still woulda heard that woman screamin' he carried away in that sack," Hank remembered.

Jeb sucked on the scab and spit. “I can’t believe Sheriff Wilkes paid us no mind when we spilled our guts on what we saw. Just because we lied about tearin’ the stop sign down at Columbia Furnace is no reason to think we’d be lyin’ about a woman bein’ murdered.”

“Sheriff Wilkes and his morons! They never did find who murdered those old maids that lived out near Possum Corners.”

“And I think their killer mighta been the one sneaking around the Johnson house in the dark last Halloween. He certainly was up to no good.”

Jeb rolled a cigarette from a tobacco pouch, lit it with a match, and took a long drag. Sticking out his tongue, he blew several smoke rings, which magically spun in circles, one through another, as he recalled that hellish night one year ago. “Yeah, I’ll never forget that poor woman screamin’. You could tell she knew she’d never see the light of day agin. He flicked an ash on the porch and said with a chuckle, “You still say that old house is not haunted?”

“I ain’t seen any ghosts bumpin’ around over there so far.”

“What about the Johnsons? They disappeared in the dead of night. One day they were plowin’ the field; the next day they were gone.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind they were murdered just like that woman. The coroner said he found blood splattered all over the house. The maniac on the black horse probably done it, not ghosts,” Hank said, as he watched a bat fly across the face of the moon.

“Nobody will ever live in that house agin’ after that. The county can’t give the place away, and since we live right next door, this place ain’t worth a shit either anymore. Dad always says if we didn’t have bad luck, we wouldn’t have no luck at all.”

“Well, Jeb, I’m gonna turn in before you give me the willies and I have to sleep with one eye open all night.”

Jeb smiled, flicked his cigarette onto the road, and pulled out his crusty wallet. “Since you don’t believe in

ghosts, I'll give you a dollar to go into that old house right now and stay 'til morning."

"Ain't no way in hell," Hank scowled as he withdrew his own wallet, "But I'll raise the stakes to three dollars if you think you've got the balls to spend the night over there."

"I don't need money that bad," Jeb conceded.

The two laughed and went to bed, but visions of ghosts and ax murderers lay heavy on their minds.

The night seemed uncommonly still as the two teens lay there rolling the things they'd seen the previous year around in their minds. The moon disappeared behind a cloud, plunging the land into pitch-blackness.

Hank couldn't sleep. All he could think of was the masked rider in black with the flowing vampire cape, the blood, and the house next door.

Jeb tossed and turned as he hummed "Faith of our Fathers" into his pillow in a low drone. A cool breeze found the crack at the base of the window and blew a musty curtain across the back of his neck. Jeb's hair stood straight up, and a chill ran down his spine that felt like icy fingers. He sat up, looked about the room, and listened for the slightest sound. The moon had reappeared in the sky, and its light shining through the limbs of the trees outside cast eerie phantoms on the bedroom wall. The open closet door gaped at him in the silence.

Several hours passed, and both brothers were restless in their beds. A sound pricked Hank's ear. Hoof beats. He knew right away no Mennonite carriage would be out at this time of night. It was just one horse coming down the road. It sounded like thunder coming from far off. He looked at his watch—midnight, Halloween.

Jeb heard it too, bounded from bed, and made a beeline across the hall to Hank's room, "It's him, he whispered excitedly. The rider in black…he's come agin. We can't let him get away agin."

"Hey, He's not our problem. Let's call Sheriff Wilkes."

"You know he won't believe us, and if he did, the maniac will be gone before he could get here."

Hank paused to weigh the alternatives and whined, “Let’s wake up, Pa. He’ll know what to do.”

“You know what Pa said last time.”

“Yeah, I know. The same thing he says every time.” Hank rattled off a few Pa-isms in a stern voice, impersonating his father: “Mind you own business. Don’t catch a bullet that was meant for somebody else. Don’t go huntin’ a wolf unless the wolf is huntin’ you. Let’s face it, Pa’s not gonna get involved unless the man in black comes knocking on our door, and maybe we shouldn’t either.”

“If we don’t take the bull by the horns, he’s gonna get away. Who knows, he might be comin’ to our house one of these nights to chop us up,” Jeb said with a long face.

“Look, birdbrain, I wanna live. I’m too young to die.”

Jeb knew his brother well enough to know Hank would never to put his life on the line to save a total stranger. He didn’t want to take any chances either, but he couldn’t stand the thought of letting the murderer get away two years in a row. And if not this night, it was true their family could be victims some other dark night. He grabbed his slingshot and some rock pellets from a drawer and tried to reason with his brother: “Hey, let’s just see what he’s gonna do and where he’s gonna go. We don’t have to arrest him or anything. Let’s just see where he goes so we can tell Sheriff Wilkes. We could be heroes.”

Hank nodded and reluctantly joined Jeb. They sneaked out through the back door and crawled behind the shrubs facing the Johnson house.

The autumn wind blew through the old tattered curtains hanging in the windows of the battered house. The full moon shone high in the sky as they watched the rider in black dismount his ebony steed across the gravel road and disappear insider the Johnson house. Hank and Jeb’s hearts pounded in their chests. They were so excited they could barely catch their breaths.

After what seemed like an eternity, the mysterious rider reappeared, carrying something in a sack in his arms, the same as last Halloween. The teens heard the sound of a

woman's screams emanating from the writhing sack.

"Time for the police," Hank stammered excitedly

"Hey, Nimrod, by the time they get here this pervert will be gone with the wind. Another poor lady murdered."

The rider tied the sack on the back of his mighty steed, mounted, and rode off into the night, heading away from the direction of the state road and deeper into the country. The teenagers mounted their bicycles and followed as close behind as they could without drawing attention to themselves.

"Where can he be going?" Jeb panted, struggling to keep up. "This road is gonna end in about a mile. There's nothin' out here but the old abandoned—"

"Cemetery! Damn, that's where he's headed all right," Hank howled.

Reluctantly, they peddled on. Neither had stepped foot in a graveyard after dark before. Their eyes flitted nervously across the eerie landscape ahead of them. They had never been so scared, but in spite of the unknown that lay ahead in the black night, they continued to follow the masked rider from a distance down the lonely road.

The boys hid their bikes in the bushes a little before they reached the abandoned graveyard. They continued on foot as silently as they could. This graveyard hadn't been used for years. Many of the graves had collapsed, and most of the old stones were leaning. The grass was high, and the trees, gnarled and leafless. The wind crawled up the back of their necks as they sprawled on the ground near the entrance to the cemetery.

The man in black dismounted, and lifting the sack from across his saddle, pitched it into a grave already dug. The pitiful screams of the helpless female filled the teens' senses with horror.

"He's going to bury her alive. What kind of monster could do such a thing?" Jeb whispered in disbelief.

"I don't want to find out, so stay quiet or I'm out of here."

Hank and Jeb were so terrified they could barely lift

their eyes to look at the monster shoveling the suffocating earth on top of his helpless victim. Her futile screams diminished as the dirt filled the grave and sealed her doom.

Finally, the monstrous deed was done and the screaming ceased entirely when the woman was finally enveloped in the damp, wormy earth. The rider placed the shovel neatly in its place on his saddlebag and mounted the bellowing, hellish steed. Without the slightest reservation, he rode off into the night from which he had come.

After the hoof beats disappeared entirely, Hank and Jeb ran to the grave in hopes they could still save the helpless woman from the horrible fate of being buried alive.

Hank found a piece of stump and Jeb a flat rock to dig. It seemed like an eternity before they finally reached a burlap sack. The worms blanketed the earthen tomb. The teens' skin crawled with disgust and loathing as they hurriedly untied the rope binding the top of the sack.

The whimpering sound of the woman within lifted their spirits as they pulled the burlap away from her head and shoulders. The full moon shone down from behind her through her golden tresses. Her neck and shoulders looked like ivory in the moonlight. Her sheer nightgown felt like silk to the touch, and the sight of her breasts heaving underneath it was the most erotic sight Hank and Jeb had ever seen.

Hank felt like a hero as he lifted her into his arms and turned the shadow of her face toward the moonlight, saying, "Jeb, I think I just died and went to heaven."

"Not yet, dearie," the she-beast cackled as she pulled Hank into the grave like a toy soldier. He heard the sound of bones breaking and looked up to see Jeb's headless body, with arms flailing and blood spewing from the cavern of his brother's neck. Hank tried to scale the slippery wall, but again, he was caught in the vise of her icy fingers. He writhed in agony as the monster playfully harvested his left eye with a long fingernail and popped it into her mouth.

Hank remembered his pa had once told him, "Good guys don't always wear white hats" as the world started to

spin.

The last thing he saw with his good eye was the horror of her face in the moonlight.

# About Billy Wells

Thanks for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it.

As a boy, I read a story entitled The October Game by Ray Bradbury in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology paperback. That story not only chilled me to the bone, but it inspired me to write horror stories of my own. I submitted one of my early attempts, Black As Night, to Ruth Tisinger, my high school English teacher. Knowing she hated scary stories and would be grading it for the next day's class at night, I included the following note at the end of the story for additional effect, "Now, Mrs. Tisinger, as you sit streaking my paper with scarlet, someone could be watching you through the window. Are you alone?"

From those humble beginnings, I have written 177 short stories, mostly horror, with surprise endings. I've seen more movies than anyone I've ever known and enjoy most genres, but a good horror film has always been my favorite. My dream would be to see some of the stories in this book in a movie or a TV show.

# Reviews In Today's World

In the past, when everyone knew everyone else in their neighborhood, people used to share information about the good and bad things they discovered to help each other in their day-to-day living.

Now, in this global village where we are in touch with everyone and everything in nanoseconds, book retailers monitor what readers say about what they read in order to distinguish the good from the bad.

Since reviews are the life's blood of today's authors, and we depend on them more than ever before, I would sincerely appreciate it if you would place a review of this book on smashwords.com or goodreads.com. It does not have to be long; only a minimum of twenty words is required.

If you take the time to review any of my horror collections, I will hold you in high regard for all eternity and

may include you in my will.

## Other Books by Billy Wells

Don’t Look Behind You: A Collection of Horror
Billy Wells Horror Anthology I
Black As Night
Shivers & Other Nightmares
In Your Face Horror
Thrillers & Chillers
Thrillers & Chillers 2
Something In the Dark and Other Nightmares
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 1
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 2
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 3
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 4
Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror---Vol. 5
Scare Factory
Midnight Snacks

Singles
It Lurks On the Mountain
The Tomb
Cold Calls
The Caller From Hell
Forbidden Fruit
The Reckoning (From Scary Stories- Vol. 2)
Crawlspace (From Scary Stories 4)